

# **Siblings, Sexualities, and Secrets: Exploring the Sibling Coming Out Experience**

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This thesis is submitted to  
Cardiff University in fulfilment of the degree  
**Doctor of Philosophy**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis presents an in-depth, qualitative mixed method (QMM) inquiry into the coming out experiences of 19 lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) and 6 heterosexual brothers and sisters. It investigates what happens to sibling relationships, sibling identities, and sibling practices when non-heterosexuality is disclosed or discovered. This study seeks to explore how LGB individuals manage their sexuality in sibling and wider family dynamics; the difficulties of keeping secrets, the fears of being rejected, and the joys or disappointments experienced as they negotiate their new sexual identities. This study also explores how heterosexual siblings are emotionally affected by the disclosure of their sibling's sexuality, and the impact that non-heterosexuality can have upon the relationships between brothers and sisters over time. The analysis is based upon data generated through semi-structured interviews, sibling sticker charts, research diaries, and debrief meetings.

The research concludes that heterosexual siblings are significant in the process of coming out, but that disclosure is often far from simple. What is revealed is that the lives of siblings are meshed in wider family connections (specifically parents) and that the decisions about whether or not to come out to heterosexual brothers and sisters are often made in light of family responsibilities, obligations and commitments. The research shows that when parents hold homophobic or hostile attitudes towards non-heterosexuality this can create barriers to openness between siblings, causing tension in family relationships. Findings also suggest that when LGB individuals do come out the reactions from their heterosexual siblings are complex and often tied up in understandings of their relational family connections. Heterosexual sibling stories show a range of simultaneous, competing, and non-linear emotions about having an LGB brother or sister, including happiness, shock, concern, and anger. When attention is paid to the impact of disclosure over time this research shows that coming out can change the relationships between LGB and heterosexual brothers and sisters in mostly positive ways, although there can also be some negative consequences for these relationships. Sibling connections can become stronger, closer, and more supportive post disclosure. This seemingly troubles the persuasive discourses of crisis and rejection from families that have been entrenched in family coming out stories.

## Acknowledgements

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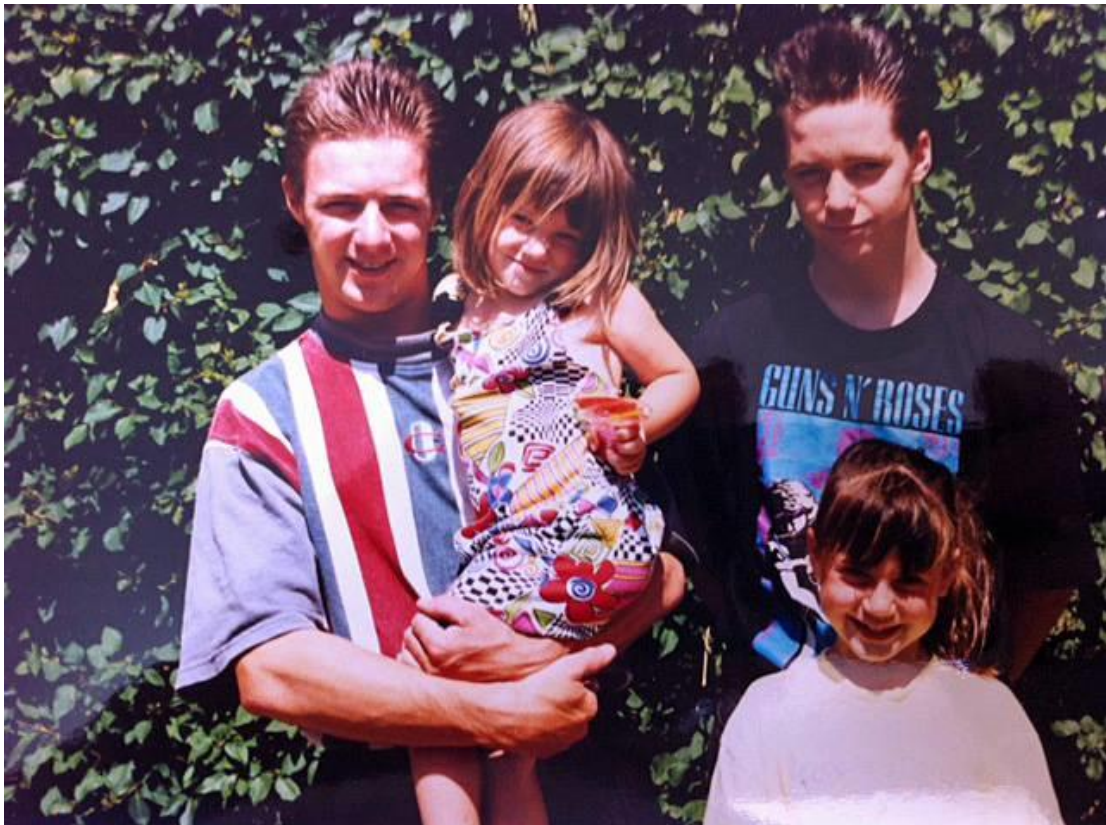
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## **For my Siblings:**

Forever connected by blood, history, and love



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## Chapter One

### Introduction

#### Forward: Coming Out and Coming Home

It is a typically cold and damp night in November, 2006. I am sitting in the front of my dad's car on the way to look at a house my parents are interested in buying. I am sat rigid with fear and intrigue as I listen to my family casually discuss whether or not they think the home owner's son is gay. They ask me what I think. I can feel their eyes on back of my head, awaiting my answer. I wonder if they can hear my heart thudding in my chest or if they can see me wriggling around uncomfortably in my seat, desperately looking for a way to escape this conversation. I reply, in what I hope is a casual tone, saying that sexuality was something I had not really thought about it. That was of course, a lie. For the past three years sexuality was all I *had* thought about. I realised I was a lesbian when I was 18 years old, and had since been terrified by what that meant. I was haunted by stories of disclosure; the trauma of coming out and being rejected by families, the shame parents feel in having a lesbian child, and the harassment that LGBs suffer at the hands of their siblings. I was too scared to come out. I did not want to disappoint my parents or lose the bond I had with my brothers or sister.

It is the same wintery night in November and I am sitting alone in my room, enjoying a rare moment of solitude. The earlier conversation had given me a lot to think about. I wonder if my family already have their suspicions about my sexuality and what they will say when I do finally tell them. My mum walks into my room, and noticing my pensive mood asks if I have anything on my mind. Suddenly feeling brave, I say that there is something I would like to talk to her about. Before I can say another word, my mum tells me that it is okay, that she knows I am gay and that she has been waiting a long time for me to tell her. I try to explain; to say how hard it has been keeping secrets and how scared I am. But I cannot get my words out. Tears roll down my cheeks. Mum scoops me up into her arms and whispers over and over again that everything is okay, that she loves me, and that my family are very proud of who I am. Later my dad and sister come into my room

and they seem pleased, if not a little shocked that I have finally come out. Everyone is happy and excited. They are asking lots of questions and giving me reassuring cuddles. I feel so relieved and lucky, but also confused. I was not being hurt or rejected by my family as I had come to expect, but rather they were loving and supporting me for who I was.

## **Introduction**

This is a coming out story that could have been told by several of the men and women involved in this study. Indeed, similar accounts of fear and anxiety in hiding sexual identities, the shock of coming out, and the relief and joy of being accepted by families, are just some of the themes that appear and reappear in many of the tales told throughout this thesis. However, this particular coming out story is my own. It details what Miller (1995) calls an 'autobiography of the question', and locates my own position as a lesbian, a daughter, and a sibling who has experienced the task of disclosing my sexuality in a family setting. Such an approach supports practices of reflexivity that are integral to this study, and highlights how this research, is at least in some part, shaped by my own experiences, concerns and questions about the sibling coming out story. It is however, important to emphasise that this thesis is not about my account of disclosure, but rather it focuses upon the stories of LGBs and their heterosexual siblings. As this thesis will show, the people involved in this study are demographically diverse; separated by different generations, different family structures, and different ideas about sexuality. Yet they are united by their sibling connections and their experiences of disclosure. Ranging from the retired older sister, who received nothing but acceptance and support from her brothers and sisters when she came out, to the gay academic whose relationship with his brothers, was destroyed after he disclosed his sexuality. From the heterosexual student who discovered that her brother was gay on Facebook, to the stay-at-home mother who experienced a range of conflicting emotions (happy, excited, shocked, and concerned) when her sister came out. These, among many others, are the stories of ordinary siblings whose lives have become (extra)ordinary through the shared experience of disclosure.

## **Section One: Tackling Terminology: Siblings and Non-Heterosexuality**

One of the important considerations in researching the sibling experience is to define who is counted as a brother or sister. At first this may seem like a relatively simple task; a sibling is a boy/man or

girl/woman with the same parents as each other. This traditional understanding of siblings is rooted in biological connections. Existing research has, however, drawn attention to the complex and varied nature of sibling relationships and the problem this poses for a universal definition of siblinghood. Edwards *et al* (2006), indicate that changes to Western family structures, such as higher rates of separation, divorce, and re-partnering have meant that:

...children may now have full siblings (sharing both biological parents), half-siblings (sharing one biological parent) and step-siblings (who are not biologically related but each of whom has a biological parent in a partner relationship) (p. 21).

There is also a growing recognition that focusing purely upon biological ties, neglects the importance of culture and the socially constructed nature of the sibling relationship. When incorporating social sibling ties, scholars such as Treffers *et al* (1990), identify as many as 26 different types of siblings. Elgar and Head (1999) similarly highlight nine different sibling categories. From a cross-cultural perspective, Cicirelli (1994) also draws attention to a variety of sibling definitions in non-industrialised societies, and between different ethnic and cultural groups. He gives the example of the Giriama culture in Kenya where siblings are understood to be people of similar age, from the same village or tribe. This research indicates that defining who is a sibling is not an easy task, as understandings are dependent upon time, culture, and social change.

Given the variation in definitions, it is important to be explicit about who is considered to be a sibling when researching family life. For the purpose of this study, I have adopted a relatively flexible definition of the terms 'sibling' or 'brother and sister'. I acknowledge the biologically and socially constructed nature of these ties by including sibling connections through biology (full or half siblings), marriage (step siblings), or adoption and fostering. Recognising the complexity of sibling connections, I also encouraged participants to define their own sibling boundaries, deciding who *they* counted as a brother or sister. This flexibility allowed Angel-Paul (one of the gay men in this study), for example, to make an important distinction between whom he defined as his 'real' and full biological brother, and his half brother and sister who had never been involved in his life, and whom he discounted from his sibling coming out story.

As there are also a variety of ways to describe those who are attracted to someone of the same sex (Sell 1997), it is also important to outline and justify the terms that I have used in this thesis to define my participants' sexuality. I discounted a number of labels including 'homosexuality' due to its clinical and medicalised historical associations (Weeks 2000). I also refrained from using the term queer, as it can be used as an umbrella term to encompass a range of identities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, people who are questioning of their sexuality, transgender individuals, transvestites (Sullivan 2003), and who or 'whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant' (Halperin 1995 p. 62). Instead I used the terms 'lesbian', 'gay', or 'bisexual', often abbreviating them with the acronym of LGB. One of the main reasons for adopting these labels was to respect participants' self-defined identities. With exclusion of one participant who described her sexuality as 'fluid and dynamic', the other 18 non-heterosexual participants defined themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (as illustrated in chapter three). Throughout this thesis, there are occasions where I also use the label non-heterosexuality to avoid frequently repeating the use of LGB.

## **Section Two: Setting the Research Agenda**

Coming out to families has been argued to be one of the central experiences in the lives of LGBs (Davies 1992). It is not then surprising to note that since the 1970s, a significant proportion of research from various academic disciplines has sought to investigate personal motivations for coming out, and the impact that this process can have upon family relationships (see, for example, Baptist and Allen 2008; D'Augelli *et al.*, 2008; Heatherington and Lavner 2008; Savin-Williams 2001; Savin-Williams and Dube 1998). However, this work has been criticised for the dominance of parent-child disclosure accounts, and the marginalisation of the experiences of siblings, as well as other members of the family (D'Augelli *et al.*, 2008; Hilton and Szymanski 2011; Savin-Williams 1998; Toomey and Richardson 2009). Given that approximately 80% of the Western population have at least one sibling, (Branje *et al.*, 2004; Cicirelli 1982; Howe and Recchia 2006; Sanders 2004) and that these are relationships characterised by their unique durability (Sanders 2004), their emotional potency (Edwards *et al* 2005; 2006; Klett-Davies 2008; Tannen 2009), and their relational significance (Edwards 2008; Edwards *et al* 2005; 2006), it is surprising that sibling accounts of coming out have rarely been studied.

Paying attention to the transformation of intimacy and some of the changes to the social, political, and legislative climates for LGBs, I draw a distinction between the types of stories that are told about disclosure in families at different historical times. I suggest that the plethora of research that arose after



the gay liberation movement, spanning between the 1980s and late 1990s evokes a persuasive discourse of homophobia and rejection in stories of family disclosure. The collection of literature at this time both illustrates and reinforces the suffering and hardship of being gay (Plummer 1995) and the crisis that the family experiences when someone reveals a non-heterosexual and stigmatised identity (Goffman 1963; Savin-Williams 2001; Savin-Williams and Ream 2003). I suggest that this focus on suffering has created a dominant narrative of adversity and rejection as the most legitimate experience of coming out within families. Savin-Williams (2001) suggests that the repeated emphasis upon the trauma of coming out and the victimisation of LGBs, has distorted the lives of non-heterosexuals who live with families that love, care, and support them (see also Gorman-Murray 2008). I show that even in the most recently published research there is evidence that coming out to families remains to be what Nordquist and Smart (2014) call a 'troubled business' (p. 97), despite the important changes that have taken place in Britain, like the repeal of Section 28 of the Local Government Act (1988)<sup>1</sup> and the passing of legislation giving LGBs more rights to family life. However, I also suggest that within this recent research we can begin to see a shift in the coming out stories being told about families. Narratives of rejection remain strong, but the literature also sheds new light on experiences of support, love, and care from families who have LGB members (Gorman-Murray 2008; Nordquist and Smart 2014; Skelton and Valentine 2005; Valentine *et al.*, 2003).

These new and more diverse stories about the coming out experience have also been illustrated in the emerging (albeit limited) scholarship on siblings. Research by American psychologists and Australian geographers has drawn a more complex picture of disclosure within sibling relationships. Research by Gorman-Murray (2008), Hilton and Szymanski (2011; 2014), and Toomey and Richardson (2009), for example, suggests that siblings are important in family coming out processes and that heterosexual brothers and sisters react to having an LGB sibling in a number of positive and negative ways. Although brothers are said to be the most likely sibling to respond to disclosure in negative or violent ways (D'Augelli *et al.*, 2008), numerous studies indicate that siblings can and do accept their LGB brothers or sisters, and that coming out can create stronger and closer bonds (D'Augelli 1991; D'Augelli *et al.*, 1998; Gorman-Murray 2008; Hilton and Szymanski 2011; 2014, Toomey and Richardson 2009).

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<sup>1</sup>Section 28 was introduced as an amendment to the Local Government Act 1988, which prevented local authorities in England and Wales from 'promoting' 'homosexuality', and depicted 'homosexual' families as 'pretend'.

The collection of historical and more recent literature on coming out in families is important as it tells us that disclosure remains to be an issue in the lives of LGBs and the practice of everyday family life. The more recent research is also important as it has begun to cast a critical light on the timeless picture of negativity that I suggest has been entrenched in stories of family disclosure. Yet, I suggest that this literature has told us very little about how sexuality actually functions *within* families. Gabb (2001; 2013) argues that there has been a discursive separation and silencing of sexuality from studies of family life, meaning that analysis into the practices of sexuality in the family is lacking. I suggest that this discursive separation is also evident in the literature on coming out, as existing work has not sufficiently accounted for the interconnected nature of siblings and parents and the effect of disclosure on the relationships between them. Valentine *et al* (2003) illustrate how researchers have framed the coming out process as an individual decision with personal consequences, rather than a process that is embedded and managed 'with, and in, families of origin' (p. 479). With a few notable exceptions (Baptist and Allen 2008; Beeler and DiProva 1999; Ben-Ari 1995; Salzburg 2004), coming out research has also relied too heavily upon individual samples of LGBs, heterosexual siblings, or parents to report on personal experiences of disclosure (D'Augelli 2005), rather than presenting a whole family account. Existing analysis then, has not sufficiently accounted for the interconnected nature of family relationships and the impact of non-heterosexuality upon these bonds, leaving us with a partial account of this central gay experience. I argue that by turning the research gaze on siblings and investigating LGB and heterosexual brothers and sisters together, we can extend our knowledge of the experiences of coming out and the everyday practices of intimacy and sexuality in families. I suggest that in doing so, we can begin to gather a picture of the subtle nuances in the experiences of coming out. This includes shedding new light on the complexities of negotiating family rules and responsibilities, the joys and difficulties of establishing new identities in the family, the affect of disclosure, the integration of LGB lives in the family over time, and how all of these experiences are closely tied up in our relationships with significant others.

This thesis examines the experiences of disclosure *between* siblings, drawing upon the perspectives of heterosexual and LGB brothers and sisters. The intention is to explore what happens to sibling relationships when non-heterosexualities are revealed. I engage with some of the complexities of negotiating non normative sexualities in heteronormative<sup>2</sup> family structures and outline how LGB sexualities were managed and expressed between siblings in this context. I consider how disclosure is

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<sup>2</sup> Heteronormativity is a concept that introduces gender as a binary category and argues that heterosexuality is constructed as the normal, natural and taken-for-granted sexuality (Jackson 2006; Warner 1993). Non-heterosexuality is measured against, and perceived as deviant in relation to the heterosexual norm. See also related concepts such as Judith Butlers (1990) heterosexual matrix and Adrienne Rich's (1980) compulsory heterosexuality.

a complex process for brothers and sisters, which can evoke simultaneous reactions of happiness, joy, and acceptance, as well as disappointment, anger, and shock. I also investigate how the process of disclosure can transform the nature of sibling relationships, identities, and practices over time for the better and for the worse. I argue that studying LGB and heterosexual siblings from the same families offers a unique and alternative picture of how sexuality functions in families, contributing towards a more integrated study of sexuality and family life (Gabb 2013).

### **Section Three: Research Aims and Questions**

The central aim of this thesis is to provide a nuanced understanding of the experience of disclosure between LGB and heterosexual siblings, accounting for the collective impacts of disclosure upon sibling connections over time. In addressing this aim, an overarching research question was formulated; 'how do LGBs and their heterosexual siblings experience the coming out process in the context of families, and what impact does this process have upon the relationships between siblings?'. Three specific research questions were also generated in order to explore different aspects of this focus, as illustrated below.

1. In what ways is the coming out process managed and strategized between LGB and heterosexual siblings?
2. How is disclosure of non-heterosexuality initially experienced between LGB and heterosexual siblings?
3. In what ways does disclosure impact upon, change, and evolve the structure of relationships, identities and everyday practices between LGB and heterosexual siblings over time?

Throughout this thesis, I return to these research questions, using them to shape and contextualise the analytical chapters. These questions will also be specifically addressed in the concluding chapter.

### **Section Four: Thesis Structure**

In this introductory chapter, I have contextualised the background and set up the parameters for this thesis. The next chapter critically explores some of the public stories that have been told about the

family, sibling relationships, and the experience of coming out. It also engages with some of the conceptual frameworks that have informed my own research. The critical review of this existing literature raises a number of questions that inform the methodological approach detailed in chapter three. The following three empirical chapters' correspond closely to the aims of my thesis and presents a snap shot of the experience of coming out and the performance of sexuality between siblings. Chapter Four locates sibling relationships and practices of disclosure in wider intergenerational relationships, noting some of the tensions between parents and children in the performance of sexualities in families. Chapter Five details the processes and strategies involved in coming out and the affective responses from heterosexual brothers and sisters. The last empirical chapter considers disclosure over time, and the impact that this can have on practices of intimacy between siblings.

## Chapter Two – Families, Siblings, and the Coming Out Process

In this chapter, I contextualise this thesis by reviewing relevant academic literature on sibling relationships and the experience of coming out as LGB in families. I consider key themes and conceptual approaches to the study of families and siblings, in order to build an understanding of how these relationships are important in people's everyday lives. I also engage with the vast literature on coming out to families. I point towards an important historical distinction in the positive and negative stories that have been told about coming out to parents. I draw this chapter to a close by exploring the emerging work that has begun to conceptualise the sibling coming out experience. I map out factors which have been said to influence disclosure among siblings, as well as initial sibling reactions, and changes to the relationships over time. I argue that this work provides an important platform for considering the experiences, affect and impact of disclosure on the bond between LGB and heterosexual siblings explored in this study.

## Chapter Three - Research as Rollercoaster

In this chapter, I outline and justify the methodological strategy that I adopted for this study. I detail and reflexively explore the way this research is framed, the recruitment and sampling techniques used, as well as processes of data collection, and the management, reduction and analysis of the data. I argue that a qualitative mixed methods approach (Gabb 2008; 2009; 2013), combining the use of semi-structured interviews, with innovative methods such as sibling sticker charts (described in chapter three), solicited research diaries, and debrief meetings, constitute an appropriate set of research tools for gaining a nuanced picture of the sibling coming out process. I suggest that the integration of these

methods gives a dynamic insight into how practices of sexuality intersect with, and complicate everyday family practices and experiences of intimacy. In this chapter, I also present a procedural account of how I planned, designed and implemented the research project, along with a reflection of some of the methodological successes, failures, surprises and challenges. I frame this aspect of the chapter around the metaphor of a rollercoaster, suggesting that qualitative research can involve a range of ups (things that went well), downs (things that did not work according to plan), and twists and turns (unexpected experiences in the field), as well as a mixture of conflicting emotions for researchers, including excitement, joy, uncertainty, fear, confusion, and relief. I suggest that it is important to consider the 'messy realities' of doing qualitative research as it contributes towards a better understanding of what it is *really like* to do research with and about siblings in the sensitive context of families and sexuality, something Jamieson *et al* (2011 p.1) suggest have been over looked in previous research.

#### Chapter Four - Coming Out of the Charmed Circle

The first of my empirical chapters explores how the coming out process between siblings is influenced and shaped by wider connections and commitments to family life. I suggest that the lives of siblings and parents are meshed together in webs of complex interconnections and as such, the decisions about coming out to siblings and the ways LGB identities are performed and negotiated in the family, is highly relational. I draw on Gayle Rubin's (1984) conceptual framework of the hierarchal system of sexual value to make sense of the different norms and values that families attribute to sexual behaviours. I show how families often have clear ideas about what constitutes 'good' and 'natural' sex in what Rubin (1984) calls the 'charmed circle', and how other sexual behaviours that are in opposition to these are perceived as 'bad', 'unnatural' and pushed to the 'outer limits' of the family. I demonstrate how these family values operate in particular ways that shapes the coming out process between siblings and impacts upon the practice and performance of non-heterosexuality in families. I show that in families where parents held homophobic or hostile attitudes towards LGB sexualities, parents regulated, restricted or 'blocked' (Nordquist and Smart 2014 p.106) the coming out experience between siblings. I argue then, that parents occupied a central role in the disciplining of sexualities in families (Foucault 1977). I also demonstrate how the regulation of LGB sexuality between siblings, can present a significant burden for LGB individuals, as well as the family as a collective. I document some of the emotional, physical and moral difficulties of maintaining secrets and the implications this can have for individuals and for the relationships between family members. This chapter offers an insight into some of the complexities of managing practices of sexuality with the obligations and responsibilities that come with family life and close personal relationships.

## Chapter Five - 'I have something to tell you': The Sibling Coming Out Story

In my second empirical chapter, I narrow the analytical lens to focus exclusively upon the process of coming out within sibling relationships. Throwing critical light on the marginalisation of siblings in traditional accounts of family disclosure, I situate the significance of siblings in these experiences. I show how heterosexual siblings are often the first to be told in the family about a brothers or sisters' LGB status, and how they can become important allies or sources of support in coming out to others. I also draw attention to the careful considerations some of the LGB participants made about if, when, and how they come out to their siblings, and how these decisions were made in relation to their existing relationships with their brothers and sisters. The second half of this chapter accounts for the affective reactions that heterosexual siblings experience during the announcement or discovery of their brothers or sisters' LGB sexuality. I suggest that these emotions are important as they can tell us a lot about the management and function of sexuality in the family and how this can affect relational connections with others. I also suggest that attention to emotions draws to light the subtle nuances in sibling stories of coming out, in that reactions can be simultaneously positive and negative. This chapter demonstrates that for many of the LGB and heterosexual participants, sibling connections are extremely important and that individual needs and desires are often put aside or carefully balanced in relation to the love, care and connection they valued in the relationships with their brothers or sisters.

## Chapter Six - Siblings in Transition: For Better, For Worse?

The final empirical chapter considers the various ways that coming out and performing LGB sexualities can transform identities, every day practices, and connections between heterosexual and LGB brothers and sisters over the passage of time. From the participant accounts it is possible to argue that disclosure changes the relationships between siblings, mostly for the better, but sometimes for the worse. What stands out is how these positive or negative shifts are experienced as profound for LGBs and their heterosexual siblings with considerable implications on their lives as family members.

## Chapter Seven – Conclusion

The conclusion begins with a summary of the substantive findings, relating these back to the original research questions that shaped this study's framing, design, and practice. I then evaluate the qualitative mixed methods research design adopted in this thesis, and consider how successful this

approach was for exploring the sibling stories of disclosure. I reflect upon some of the limitations and suggest how this research may be built upon and developed in the future. I end on a final note about what this thesis has contributed to knowledge about sibling relationships, family life, and the way that non-heterosexuality functions in these contexts.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Families, Siblings, and the Coming Out Process**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I set the scene for this thesis by critically engaging with the academic stories that have been told about families, sibling relationships, and the historical and contemporary experience of coming out. The purpose of accounting for this literature is to draw out and theoretically situate my work within current perspectives and conceptual approaches to family studies, and work on sexuality, which provides an important framework for understanding the sibling experience of coming out, as explored later in this thesis. The first section addresses key sociological debates about family life and social change. It also summaries the academic work on siblings, and how these relational connections are positioned as highly significant in people's everyday lives. The second section begins with a brief introduction to the debates on the theorization of sexuality, detailing a move towards a social constructionist understanding of sexual identity. It then gives a detailed and critical account of the research on coming out to families. I draw attention to the marginalisation of sibling stories in traditional accounts of disclosure, and argue that there appears to be a discourse of negativity and rejection in the parental coming out narratives. The final section details emerging academic work which investigates sibling experiences with disclosure. I suggest this research provides an important platform for understanding the significance of siblings in processes of disclosure, and for highlighting new and more positive coming out stories in families.

#### **Section One: Framing Family and Sibling Relationships**

As this chapter goes on to show, sibling relationships are complex, varied and unique. They are relationships that many (80-90%) western children experience (Branje *et al.*, 2004; Howe and Recchia 2006; Cicirelli 1982), and they are connections that are becoming increasingly diverse as patterns of social and family life shift and change (Edwards *et al.*, 2006). They are also relationships that are fundamentally relational, meaning that 'brothers and sisters are important to who we think we are, our relationships to other people, and our sense of our place in the social world' (Edwards 2008 p. 51). As suggested here by Edwards (2008), the concept of relationality refers to a sense of self that is founded on and shaped by the relationships in which individuals are embedded and the important life choices that are made with these significant others in mind (May 2011). This means that relationality is about everyday life and the experiences, negotiations, and decisions or choices that are made about the



relationships with people that matter, be those connected by blood, marriage or choice (Smart 2007). In recognising that sibling relationships do not exist in isolation and that they are embedded in, and linked to wider family connections (e.g. ties with parents) (see Nordquist and Smart 2014), the first section in this chapter lays the theoretical groundwork for a relational understanding of siblings by briefly engaging with the sociological debates concerning family life and the changes that have occurred to contemporary family living.

### *Understanding 'Families'*

Contemporary sociological theorising about family life has centred on the theme of social change and the impact that this has had upon personal relationships (Gillies 2003). It has been said that the modern world is an extraordinary time to research families (Zinn, 2000), due to the dramatic transformations that have occurred to the structure and processes of western family life (Gilding 2010). In pre-industrialised societies, the family was perceived to be one of the primary structures of society, producing basic goods and services and ordering roles and obligations (Gillies 2003). During these times it was relatively easy to define what 'the family' was, or at least what a family was perceived to be - a heterosexual, married couple, living together with their happy healthy children (Silva and Smart 1999). Within this picture, the family was a unit of consumption with a clear division of labour, where men were the primary breadwinners for the family, and women were largely responsible for care (including cooking, cleaning, and raising children) (Bernardes 1997). This dynamic was labelled as the nuclear family (also known as the traditional or cereal packet family), and portrayed as a unitary whole, thought of as 'if it were a single actor with a single class position, standard of living, and a set of interests' (Ferree, 1990 p. 867). The nuclear family was, and arguably still is one the most socially and politically indorsed family forms. It was constructed as 'the lynchpin of social cohesion, civilisation and order, and as a structure embodying the moral health of society' (Gillies 2003 p. 4).

However, the changes that have occurred to intimate life as a consequence of post-industrialisation has raised important questions about what constitutes a modern 'family', and has challenged our traditional understandings of family life (Copeland and White 1991). Significant social changes have included a rise in cohabitation, divorce, lone-parent households, births outside of marriage, lone person and non-family households, remarriage, and gay and lesbian families (Allan *et al.*, 2011). Family forms that were once rare, such as blended families, single parents families, and LGB families, are now more common as a consequence of the changes to intimacy (Copeland and White 1991). Concepts of individualisation or detraditionalisation have been argued to be at the heart of this social change (Charles *et al.*, 2008).

The individualisation thesis is a social concept, which evolved in the 1990s and has become one of the 'big ideas' in the sociological study of family life (Smart 2007 p. 17). According to social theorists such as Giddens (1992), Beck (1992), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) and Bauman (2003), we have entered into a 'late modern' epoch, in which there is a new social order of reflexive modernity that has transformed the experience of the personal and the intimate. Individualization explains a weakening of traditional social structures of class, gender, sexuality, religion and the family, and a revision of the boundaries of intimacy. This new phase of modernity has arguably given individuals more choice in deciding how to live their lives, but at the consequence of the customs that bound families together.

Traditional social relationships bonds and belief systems that used to define people's lives in the narrowest sense have been losing more and more of their meaning...new space and new options have thereby opened up for individuals. Now men and women can and should, may and must, decide for themselves how to shape their lives, within certain limits, at least (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995 p. xi).

The vision of contemporary family life based upon individual agency or 'do it yourself biographies' (Beck 1992) has led to the emergence of competing sociological debates, with theorists presenting different interpretations of these changes. Tied up in these debates are questions of 'how far social identity and agency should be seen as individualised or relational concepts' (Mason 2004 p. 162). Gillies (2003) suggests that the literature on intimacy can be divided into three broad perspectives; breakdown, democratisation, and continuity or egalitarianism. These perspectives are explored in more detail below.

Theorists such as Bauman (2003), Beck (1992), Beck-Gernsheim (2002), Fukuyama (1999) and Popenoe (1993) present a pessimistic view of these social changes, by arguing that a breakdown in traditional ties is indicative of the collapse of families and the weakening of the moral standards once maintained by them. At the most extreme Bauman (2003) presents an almost apocalyptic view of the transformation of fixed to chosen family kinship, defining them as frail, ill-defined, threatened, risk-imbued and unable to provide support to its members as it once did.

The falling out of fashion and out of practice of orthodox affinity cannot but rebound on the plight of kinship. Lacking stable bridges for inflowing traffic, kinship networks feel frail and threatened. The boundaries are blurred and disputed, they dissolve in a terrain with no clear-cut properties titles and hereditary tenures – a frontier-land; sometimes a battlefield, other times an object of court battles that are not less bitter. Kinship networks cannot be sure of their chances of survival, let alone calculate their life expectations (Bauman 2003 p. 31).

The American sociologist, David Popenoe (1993) has also argued that women's new position in the labour market and the dissolution of women's material role in the family has led to 'end-of-the-line family decline' (p. 540).

Families have lost function, social power, and authority over their members. They have grown smaller in size, less stable, and shorter in life span. People have become less willing to invest time, money and energy in family life, turning instead to investing in themselves (Popenoe 1993 p. 528)

For Popenoe (1993), these changes are problematic as they mean that contemporary families are no longer meeting the functional needs of society, including procreation, socialization of children, and provision of care. In light of this perceived family trouble, risk and uncertainty there is an emphasis upon the reassurance of family values, laden with tradition and authority.

In contrast to themes of breakdown, a number of social theorists suggest that the democratisation of personal life is a positive outcome of social change, and one which marks a progressive shift towards more egalitarian relationships. Scholars such as Giddens (1992) and Weeks *et al* (2001) present optimistic views arguing that detraditionalisation has freed people from the constrained social roles and structures of the past, allowing for greater diversity in lifestyle choice, and more fulfilment in relationships. Giddens (1992), for example, argues that individualisation provides a platform for couples to be able to redefine their relationships, outside of status bound obligations, creating new democratic and equal styles of relating based on mutual satisfaction. Most notoriously Giddens (1992) focuses upon the concept of the pure relationship which:

Refer[s] to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within in (p. 58).

Giddens portrays lesbian and gay men as pioneers for the pure relationship (a relationship of sexual and emotional equality) and he puts them at the very forefront of processes of individualisation. Giddens has however been highly criticised for failing to account for the social significance of class, gender, power and intergenerational relationships (see Crow 2002; Jamieson 1998; Smart and Neale 1999).

Since the 1990s, a new way of theorising the family has arisen that has rejected or moved beyond ideas of the family as in decline or democratic. Some contemporary family sociologists have argued that focusing upon the restrictive boundaries of 'the family' does not account for the rich tapestry of family living, nor does it give attention to the differences between families, in time and through culture, and between the structures of gender, class and sexuality. The counter argument to individualisation is based on different readings of social trends, mapping a change in structure and meaning in families, rather than a decline in love, care and protection. With an emphasis upon empirical work some sociologists argue that family life is continuing, which they suggest is evident by principles of commitment and reciprocity found within personal relationships (Chambers 2012). There is also a notable emphasis upon concepts of relationality – the idea that people exist within important personal networks which they actively seek to sustain (Smart 2007) as an important feature of their everyday lives. It is within this framework of family continuity that I theoretically situate my thesis. I define the family as a relational and interactive group of people, created and maintained through every day practices (Morgan 1996; 1999; 2011a) and the obligations and commitments that sustain these. Within this framing, I draw on a number of concepts to help explain the coming out experiences between siblings, including family practices (Morgan 1996; 1999; 2011a), personal life (Smart 2007), and intimacy (Jamieson 1998; 2011). These concepts are explored in more detail below.

Moving away from preconceived definitions of the family as an institution to which individuals belong, David Morgan argues that family life is 'achieved, done, or enacted' (Hicks 2011 p. 54). In developing

the concept of 'family practices', Morgan (1996; 2011a) suggests that as we live in a society that is fluid, complex, and subject to change, family is something that is created by individuals. According to Morgan, the family is a constructed interaction; something that is 'done', an active process that comprises the routines of doing family life rather than the family being something that people 'are'. For Morgan (1996) mowing the lawn is an example of a family practice as it represents a sense of the active, the everyday, the routine. Morgan (1996) argues that attention to the trivial practices that families engage in tells us about how people actually experience family life. The notion of family practices is also a concept 'which deal[s] in some way with ideas of parenthood, kinship and marriage and the expectations and obligations which are associated with these practices' (Morgan 1996 p.11). Edwards *et al* (2006) argue that Morgan's concept of family practices is particularly relevant for studying siblings as it is the taken for granted practices of talk, activity and care which are central to sibling's material and embodied identities. This theoretical framework is essential then, for making sense of everyday practices between LGB and heterosexual siblings and any changes that may occur to identities and relational connections with the discovery or announcement of non-heterosexuality.

Lynn Jamieson (1998) also argues that intimate relationships and the commitments people make to these bonds have extended beyond those posited by individualisation theorists. Her work has been influential in redefining sociological understandings of family and personal relationship. Jamieson (1998) focuses upon the concept of intimacy, defined as 'any form of close association in which people acquire familiarity, that is shared detailed knowledge about each other' (p. 8). She suggests that intimacy is a concept which captures the quality of close connections between people and the processes for creating these quality interactions (Jamieson 2011). The quality of these connections is something that she indicates can be emotional, cognitive, and embodied. Jamieson's approach is useful in this thesis for mapping how siblings conceptualise closeness (and also distance) and how disclosure of LGB sexualities problematises practices of intimacy and feelings of togetherness.

Chosen, rather than given families or personal relationships have also featured within the framework of family continuity. Building upon Morgan's work, Carol Smart (2007) attempts to broaden the conceptualization of families, through her 'personal life' approach. She argues that the individualization thesis has presented a distorted picture of contemporary family life as it is actually lived failing to recognise how people are 'embedded in history, tradition, biography, and relationships' (Smart 2007 p. 187). Counter to these ideas Smart (2007) proposes a 'connectedness thesis' emphasising ideas of belonging in people's personal lives and the fluid nature of contemporary family meanings and

structures. The premise of personal life is to understand that people are not isolated, but rather 'inherently connected and embedded, within both socio-cultural-historical contexts and webs of relationships' (May 2012 p. 416). Smart (2007) recognises the importance of understanding the family as a set of active practices, yet she draws greater attention to individually experienced biographies, imaginaries, memories, relatedness and relationality; what these mean to people and how they are associated with everyday family life. Smart (2007) suggests that such an approach extends our understandings of the variety of meaningful relationships accounting for 'all sorts of families, all sorts of relationships and intimacies, diverse sexualities, friendships and acquaintances' (p. 188). This approach, she suggests helps fosters a better understanding of what is meaningful to people in relation to their personal lives. The work of Carol Smart (2007) is useful as it pushes the conceptual boundaries of 'the family', contributing towards a more diverse picture of what family life actually looks like, and how it incorporates a range of connections that extend beyond biology.

Most of the sociological work on 'given' families have focused primarily upon heterosexual relationships although a growing number of studies have started to explore the families of non-heterosexuals (see Gabb 2005; Weeks *et al.*, 2001; Weston 1991). Kath Weston (1991) and Jeffrey Weeks and colleagues (2001) have, for example, focused on the family lives of non-heterosexuals, determining how families within these communities are created through choice, rather than through restrictive blood or marriage ties. They argue that these 'families of choice' have fluid boundaries and can consist of lesbian and gay men, as well as former partners, lovers, people they have lived with, relatives, and children (biological or adopted). They make the important point that what defines these connections as family is the mutual provision of support, care and commitment. The scholarship on families of choice is important as it signals new forms of belonging and togetherness which challenge the traditional views about intimate family ties (Chambers 2012).

What this collection of literature suggests is that although family structures may have changed, practices of care and commitment remain fundamental to relational connections (Smart 2007). Silva and Smart (1999) propose there is an emphasis upon 'the sharing of resources, caring, responsibilities and obligations' (p. 7) in contemporary families that were defined as key features of 'the family' in the past. As such, Silva and Smart (1999) suggest that 'families remain a crucial relational entity playing a fundamental part in the intimate life of and connections between individuals' (p. 5). What this literature tells us is, then, is that families still matter and individuals continue to place importance upon their family ties or intimate connections (Gillies *et al.*, 2001; Ribbens McCarthy *et al.*, 2003). I suggest that

concepts of families as relational, durable and important are of central importance to the sibling coming out experience, as I will go on to show how the decisions made about disclosure and the way LGBs live their lives are often made in relation to wider understandings of family commitments and relationships.

### *Understanding Siblings*

Sibling stories have been entrenched throughout history, and told and retold in bible stories, folklore, legends, myths, fairy tales, literature and popular culture (Sanders 2004). The tale of Cinderella, who manages to break free from the misery of sibling rivalry and abuse; the striking contrast between the sisters in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*; and the amusing love-hate relationship between Monica and Ross in the American sitcom *Friends*, are powerful illustrations of the widespread interest in, perhaps even enchantment by siblings. Within these stories it is possible to chart particular discourses about sibling relationships. Sibling connections as influential and lifelong, as good or evil, and as allies or rivals, are themes that run central to the stories told about siblings. Sanders (2004) suggests that the prevalence of these notions in fictional sibling stories is important as they can 'convey real-life themes in a way that is vivid, detailed and applied', contributing towards an understanding of contemporary sibling relationships (p. 8). Sanders (2004) point is particularly interesting, as I suggest that a number of similar themes are presented in the academic literature on sibling relationships.

Similar to scholarship on families, it is also possible to chart extensive research which focuses upon sibling relationships. Although it has been argued that research into siblings is under-represented in academia due to the privileging of parent-child relationships (Edwards *et al.*, 2006, Sanders 2004), since the 1980s there has been a rise in scholarship within multi-disciplinary fields, including sociology, psychology, anthropology and family therapy. Within this collection of research, it is possible to identify a number of distinct ways in which sibling relationships have been framed. This includes, but is not exclusive to, siblings as developmentally important, emotionally potent, comparative, fluid, and lifelong. As I engage with some of this literature here, I suggest that what lies at the heart of this research is an understanding that the connections between siblings, whether constructed as 'good' or 'bad', are deeply meaningful, important, and emotive. I suggest that it is important explore how siblings have been framed and understood, in order to make sense of the coming out experiences discussed later in this thesis.

One of the most prominent themes in the literature on siblings is the importance of these bonds in people's everyday lives. Psychologists, for example, argue that siblings are influential towards one another and they play a special role in the development of children. Over the past 30 years, a growing body of psychological research has presented evidence that siblings have a significant impact upon each other's social, emotional and cognitive worlds (see Bank and Kahn 1982; Dunn 1983; Furman and Buhrmester 1985; Whiteman and Christiansen 2008). As siblings are understood to spend a great deal of time together, often more than they spend with parents or friends (McHale and Crouter 1996), their interactions have been argued to provide a rich site of learning and socialisation (Kramer and Conger 2009). Brody (1998), for example, suggests that 'older siblings can act as teachers, managers, and helpers when playing with their younger brothers and sisters, and the younger siblings assume the corresponding learner, managee, and helper roles' (p. 16). As such, the intimate setting of the sibling relationship is where Rustin (2007) argues, many of us first learn how to make friends, how to assert ourselves in disputes, how to share, give, and receive, and how to experience and control love and hate. Research suggests that both cooperative and conflictual play and interactions help siblings (older and younger) develop new skills, emotional understanding, and self-regulation, so that they can begin to define themselves as individuals (see Brody 1998; Kramer 2004; Stormshak *et al.*, 2009). These skills, gained through sibling interactions, are said to provide an important foundation for the trials and tribulations young people and adults are faced with in their social lives (Brody 1998). That is not to say that all psychological research has made connections between the positive elements of sibling socialisation. As a leading expert in the field, Dunn (1983; 2005), suggests the daily contact and familiarity between siblings creates an environment in which children can be influenced by one another's behaviour. If sibling relationships are marked by anti-social behaviours or substance abuse, this can arguably put children at risk of negative behaviour adjustment (Stormshak *et al.*, 2009). Drawing upon interviews and observations with children (pre-school to adolescent), Dunn (1988), for example, found a positive correlation between the hostile behaviours of older siblings, and younger siblings development of aggression and conflict.

Stepping away from an expert, 'top-down' approach, Edwards *et al.*'s (2006) ground breaking work on children's own perspectives of sibling relationships, also emphasises the profound meaning that children ascribe to these bonds. Edwards *et al.* (2006) suggest that issues of identity and relationality lie at the heart of sibling connections, and how they form an 'important part of who they are, their relationships to other people, and their sense of their place in the social world' (p. 2). Edwards *et al.* (2006) show how sibling identities are created and maintained through everyday practices of talk, interaction and care and how these are experienced through social constructions of gender and age.



They argue that the connections between siblings are important to debates of individualisation as they demonstrate interdependent identities and relational practices and meanings. Lucey (2010), and Mitchell (2003) suggest that one of the interesting characteristics of sibling relationships is their seriality; meaning the experiences of being one among a series or a group, while also maintaining an awareness of uniqueness. Lucey (2010) suggests that sibling relationships are where people first experience the simultaneous desire to be 'unique, special, autonomous and free', yet also part of a collective to which they wish to belong (p. 476).

There has also been considerable interest in the nature and quality of sibling relationships and the impact they can have on children's well-being. There appears to be a fascination with the emotionally potent connections between brothers and sisters, particularly as they can be constructed as love/hate relationships (Dunn and Kendrick 1982; Tannen 2009). On the one hand, research suggests that brothers and sisters can be important sources of care, protection and support for one another, providing a sense of solidarity, security and belonging (Bedford *et al.*, 2000; Brannen *et al.*, 2000; Coles 2003; Dunn 2005; Kramer and Bank 2005; Sanders 2004). In exploring children's own perspectives of their sibling relationships, Edwards *et al* (2005; 2006), for example, note how care and protection are trivial and routine practices among siblings. Edwards and colleagues (2006) identify how protection and care in the children narratives are specifically bound to birth order hierarchies. Older siblings were seen to protect and care for their younger brothers and sisters, as demonstrated in a relationship that Edwards *et al* discuss between, Bart (aged 12) and Zack (aged 9).

**Zack:** He's in secondary school now and I'm in primary school. It was good [when we were in the same school] because if someone was picking on me I could go and tell my brother and he would come and sort it out for me

**Bart:** I don't go to the same school as my brother but I want to so if he gets into trouble I can stick up for him. Yeah, people down the street keep kicking his bike and he got a stone thrown at him at school but we didn't know who it was so I couldn't do anything about it... (Edwards *et al.*, 2006 p. 69)

As this example from Edwards *et al*'s (2006) research illustrates, it is possible to see in children's accounts a distinction between the older brother's position as a protector and the younger brother as a recipient of this care. Zack reinforced this point by stating that 'it's mainly older brothers that stick up for younger brothers' (in Edwards *et al.*, 2006 p. 69), and he would not expect the same level of protection

or care from his younger brother. As illustrated here, some of the practices of care and protection spanned beyond the realm of the home, into school and the local neighbourhood. Similarly, other scholars have shown how brothers and sisters can function as important sources of support when siblings are faced with bullying in schools and local neighbourhoods (Hadfield *et al.*, 2006) or in older age, particularly when health deteriorates (Cicirell *et al.*, 1992).

That is not to say that there is not conflict or tension between siblings and a vast array of literature explores everyday experiences of competition, conflict and rivalry (Cicirelli 1995; Faber and Mazlish 1998; Kramer and Conger 2009; Prall 1999). In the wake of Freud's psychoanalytic work, we have a long and varied history of defining the very nature of sibling relationships in terms of rivalry.

Psychologists and psychoanalysts have presented many reasons for conflict, including feelings of displacement (Freud 1917 in Coles 2003), dethronement; meaning no longer being the centre of attention (Adler 1958), and emotional and physical annihilation (Rowe 2007; Merrell 1995). These psychological and psychoanalytical explanations for conflict imply that the arrival of a second child into the family causes trauma and distress for a first born child. Trauma is linked to the fears that a sibling might harbour the loss of parental love and personal worth (Merrell 1995), being rendered insignificant (Rowe 2007), and losing the position of superiority within the family (Adler 1958). Within this literature, rivalry has been depicted as dangerous and problematic to children (and adults). The idea of conflict as being dangerous is reflected in the growing self-help literature on dealing with these family issues (see Doherty and Coleridge 2010; Faber and Mazlish 1998; Goldenthal 2000; Parker and Stimpson 2002). However, conflict is not always depicted as a bad or dangerous element of sibling connections and some developmental theorists suggest that it is a natural and healthy component of early social development. Herrera and Dunn (1997), for example suggest that conflict helps young people to develop their listening skills, the ability to argue persuasively, to accept the different opinions of others, and to work towards creating a resolution.

Edwards *et al* (2006) also indicate that conflict is part of everyday sibling interactions. They note how children frequently talk of being 'annoyed', 'bugged' or 'wound up' by their brothers and sisters.

Edwards *et al* (2006) suggest that at the heart of conflict were issues of age, power hierarchies, status and sense of self. They suggest that older siblings often described the behaviour and actions of their younger brothers or sisters as particularly problematic. This was in part linked to moral reputations, but it was also about ignoring or not understanding the rules about boundaries of space (in and outside the home), and ownership of personal possessions. Edwards *et al* (2006) also note how younger sibling's accounts of conflict resonate with feelings of inequality, physical inferiority and the struggle for power.

Sibling relationships have also been uniquely characterised by simultaneous expressions of love and hate. Dunn and Kendrick's (1982) observational research on early childhood sibling relationships revealed that brothers and sisters had 'a wide range and complexity of feelings expressed, and considerable pragmatic understanding of how to annoy and how to console the other' (p. 42). In her research on sister narratives, Tannen (2009) also suggests that close childhood proximity, shared histories and hierarchies of age, means that sister relationships are driven by forces of connection and competition.

A sister is the one person you can brag to – or the one you'll never tell about your triumphs because she'd be jealous. She's the one you can call in the middle of the night when you can't sleep, or the one who doesn't want to hear about your problems unless you're ready to do something about them. She's the one who's there when you need her, or the one whose absence in a crisis hurts the most (p. 10-11)

These contradictory feelings and behaviours, which have been said to span the relationships between sisters, and brothers, create a paradoxical nature unique to siblings, making these connections compelling and important (Myers and Goodboy 2010).

Finally, it is possible to identify themes of longevity and change in academic research on siblings. It is argued that sibling relationships are unique and important interactions, by virtue of their duration (Cicirelli 1994; 1995a; Sanders 2004). Whether sibling connections are close or distant, loving or fraught, they are constructed as life-long relationships. Cicirelli (1995a) indicates this by suggesting that the relationships with siblings (even half, step or adopted); 'usually begin early enough in life to have a longer time course than relationships with parents, spouses, offspring, or most other friends and relatives' (p. 2). Stories about siblings, then, are often characterised by a sense of permanent togetherness, solidarity and belonging. As Klagsbrun (1992) suggests:

Parents die, friends drift away, marriages dissolve. But brothers and sisters cannot be divorced; even if they do not speak to each other for twenty years, they remain forever connected by blood and history (p. xi)

Cicirelli (1995a) suggests that duration itself can be an important factor to consider when exploring the impact of sibling relationships.

Within this notion of durability, there is also an interest in the fluid nature of sibling connections, and the changes that are experienced in, and to these relations. Psychological and developmental research has, for example, pointed towards the intensity of contact between siblings at different times in the life span<sup>3</sup>. While childhood is argued to be marked by intense everyday interactions in the home (Cicirelli 1995a; McHale and Crouter 1996), sibling contact in late adolescence and early adulthood is seen to be more distant as people gain greater independence from their families of origin (White 2001). Sibling connections are then argued to take on a renewed sense of importance in older age (over 65) when siblings can become essential care and support systems for one another (Cicirelli 1989; Connidis 1994; Goetting 1986; Gold 1989; Ross and Milgram 1982; White 2001; White and Riedmann 1992).

Among the literature on sibling change, there is also research which suggests that certain events and transitions across the life span, can shift individual biographies (Hutchison 2010) and disrupt the everyday practices and relational identities between siblings (Edwards *et al.*, 2005; 2006). Accounting for the voices of sisters, Mauthner (2005), for example, notes how certain emotional life events, such as acquiring or losing boyfriends or girlfriends, leaving home, and becoming a mother, coincided with important points of transition in the sisters 'sense of self', subjectivity and their relationships with each other. She gives the example of Annabel and Chloe two sisters who experienced a shift in their relationship when Annabel's best friend became mentally ill. This event signalled an end to the close bond between Annabel and her best friend, and recreated a much closer and more intimate connection to her sister Chloe. Psychological scholars have also examined the role of marriage, divorce, fostering, and the death of a family member as critical life moments. They discuss the positive or negative implications these critical transitions have upon sibling relationships (Cicirelli 1995b). For example, Bedford's (1992) research indicates that for a third of sibling pairs who get married to their partners, their sibling connections suffer and become more distant. A variety of scholars have also examined the consequence of parental divorce on sibling relationships. On the one hand, divorce has been seen to create more hostile and less supportive connections between siblings when compared to sibling relationships in non-divorced families (Milevsky 2004; Poortman and Voorpostel 2009; Sheehan *et al.*, 2004). Yet on the other, there is also evidence to suggest that siblings can act as important sources of

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<sup>3</sup> Cicirelli (1995) suggests that a life span approach explores the 'total time of an individual's life from conception to birth to death' (p. 14) and therefore offers a good framework for bringing to light changes to sibling relationships over time.

support in families experiencing divorce, and sisters in particular are seen to take on renewed roles as carers and comforters to their siblings (Gass *et al.*, 2007).

Research also suggests that the shifts in sibling relationships are not just associated with critical life events, but can occur as a normal part of siblinghood. Contrary to psychological work that characterises sibling identities as fixed, Edwards *et al* (2005; 2006) talk about the notion of 'shifting identifications' demonstrating how children experience changes to their sibling connections and their own sense of self as they start to get older. They suggest that these routine shifts can evoke feelings of sameness, difference, closeness or distance. Edwards *et al.*, (2005) give the example of Natalie, who noted the change in her relationship as her sister started to grow up.

When I couldn't get to sleep or something, she used to let me come and sleep in her bed and stuff, and used to, like, hug. And now it's like her in one bedroom and me in the other, because we don't really want to sleep together now. She thinks I'm a bit babyish now, because I'm not like out at all the places like she's going (p.4)

As Natalie's story demonstrates, the change in her sister relationship evoked powerful feelings of loss and exclusion linked to distance and boundaries of space and place.

In this first section, I have introduced and critically explored a range of scholarship and theoretical approaches to the study of families and sibling relationships. In doing so, I have drawn out the dynamic, complex and relational worlds of families and siblings and acknowledged the importance of them in shaping our everyday lives. In the next section, I explore the literature on coming out to families, highlighting the curious marginalisation of sibling stories in traditional accounts of disclosure.

## **Section Two: Coming out in Families: A Gamble and a Risk?**

### *Theorising Sexuality*

Before engaging with the scholarship on coming out, it is important to briefly trace the theoretical construction of sexuality, outlining the way it is conceived within this thesis. It is important to outline the way that sex, sexuality and gender has been traditionally theorised and understood, as in the next

section I demonstrate how these conceptualisations have informed and complicated the experience of coming out in families.

The conceptualisation of sexuality and the formation and management of LGB identities has had a long and complicated social and academic history. Within academic scholarship it is possible to ascertain that sexuality is complex, demonstrated by the competing theoretical debates about what determines a person's sexual identity. Weeks (2000; 2003) notes that historical writers rationalised sex, sexuality and gender as a biological mandate which reflected an essentialist approach to theorising sexuality. Biological, psychological and physiological perspectives emphasised 'truths' about sexuality and depicted them as timeless and locked in beliefs of internal determinism (Weeks 2000). Accordingly, these assumptions that people were born with a biologically determined sexual nature, created gendered and sexual binaries (i.e. heterosexual and homosexual). These sexual categories led to a science of sexuality that revealed the 'nature' of sexual instinct and served as a powerful standard to judge and regulate sexualised and gendered behaviours (Seidman, 2003). These perspectives have however, been criticised by scholars who conceptualise sexuality as socially constructed; produced through influences from our history, culture and language. Social science scholars have argued for an understanding of sexuality and gender that moves far beyond a world of nature, to one that considers 'the intricate and multiple ways in which our emotions, desires and relationships are shaped by the society we live in' (Cartledge and Ryan 1983 in Weeks 2000 p. 19).

The origins of the social construction of sexuality can be traced back to the influential work of Mary McIntosh (1968) as well as to Foucault's three volumes on *The History of Sexuality* (1978; 1985; 1986). McIntosh's essay, 'The Homosexual Role' (1968) emphasised the importance of depicting 'homosexuality' as a social role whose origins and changing context should be studied within a particular historical framework, rather than as a psychiatric condition. Foucault's intellectual work has also had an undeniable impact upon the study of sexuality. Foucault (1978) contested the view that sex was something biological and natural, arguing instead that sexuality was a constructed feature of historical, cultural and social experience, which were being constantly produced, changed and modified.

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries to gradually

uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct (Foucault 1978 p.105).

For Foucault, sexuality was concerned with the relationship of social elements, which had a complex history, but achieved a modern conceptual unity (Weeks, 2003). Since the foundational work of McIntosh and Foucault, a number of social scientists have engaged with the idea of the socially constructed nature of sexuality and the ways in which social practice gives meaning to sexualised activities (Seidman, 2003). This includes the work of Adrienne Rich (1980) on 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', where she represents heterosexuality as being socially constructed by oppressive social forces. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) has also been enormously influential in theorising gender and sexuality as a performance rather than natural. Jeffrey Weeks (2000; 2003; 2007) has drawn attention to the power of cultural forces in determining who and what we are, and the groundbreaking work of Sedgwick (2008) in *Epistemology of the Closet* has also highlighted the contradictory depictions of gay men – the 'endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition' as a basic incoherence about the way sexuality has been perceived within modern society (p. 1). Sedgwick (2008) argues that these terms not only limit freedom and understanding, but act as a strategy for the control of sexuality.

As demonstrated here, there is great diversity in the way that social scientists conceptualise sexuality. Yet this work is united by the emphasis upon the influence of society and social relations on sexuality, and the rejection of explaining human behaviour by what Cherfas and Gribbin (1984) call a 'dance of the chromosomes' (in Weeks 2003 p. 20). It is within this intellectual juncture that this thesis is situated, with sexuality being understood as a social construct which is changing over time.

### *Coming Out to Parents*

When reviewing the existing stories on coming out to parents, I suggest that it is possible to divide the scholarship into two distinct areas. The first area details research which arose after the gay liberation movement, starting in the 1980s and spanning to the late 90s. Within this collection of literature, I argue that there is a persuasive and dominant account of negativity in the stories of coming out, demonstrated by concerns about disclosing, and the actual experiences of rejection by parents. The second phase of literature has arisen more recently, and takes into account the important social, cultural, and legal changes in the lives of LGBs. Within this literature there is still evidence to suggest that coming out to

families remains a 'troubled business' (Nordquist and Smart 2014 p. 97). Yet, I suggest there has been something of a shift and this literature also presents new stories of support, love and care from families (Gorman-Murray 2008; Nordquist and Smart 2014; Valentine *et al.*, 2003). I suggest that this literature points towards a more nuanced account of disclosure, especially when extended families are accounted for.

There are many different way of defining the process of coming out, which can shift in accordance with time and culture. For the purpose of this thesis, I draw upon Weston's (1991) definition of coming out as a 'dual sense of claiming a lesbian or gay identity for oneself and communicating that identity to others' (p. 44). Within academic literature, there are many stories that have been told and retold about different elements of the coming out experience. These stories have focused largely upon an individual's process of disclosure and the consequences of such for the self and for personal relationships or the consequences of disclosing (see, for example Plummer 1995; Valentine *et al.*, 2003). Within these accounts, the process of revealing a non-heterosexual identity, particularly to parents has been portrayed as a central experience and one of the most significant events in the lives of LGBs (Davies 1992).

It was only in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the gay rights movement was gaining momentum and strength in American and Britain, that coming out to parents and relatives became a historical, political and cultural possibility (Plummer 1995). Of course there were LGBs before this point, but Weston (1991) suggests, 'homosexuals in the days before Stonewall did not dare reveal their sexual identities to others through fear of criminal prosecution, incarceration, and loss of employment' (p. 44). Prior to this point LGBs were subjected to social hostility, persecution and victimisation<sup>4</sup> (Comstock, 1991; Hall, 2005; Herek and Berrill, 1992; Mason, 2002; Savin-Williams, 1990; Smyth, 1992), as a sexual minority status was believed to be a lifestyle outside the perimeters of social acceptability, and heterosexuality was enforced as the only right and moral sexuality.

According to Rubin (1984) the persuasive emphasis upon heterosexuality and heteronormativity (Warner 1991) created a sex hierarchy within mainstream society. Rubin (1984) argues that sexual acts and lifestyles within modern western society are burdened with significance, and get appraised according to a 'hierarchal system of sexual value' (p. 151). Rubin (1984) constructs an analytic

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to stress that this change reflects a western phenomenon, and that persecution remains a social and legal reality for many LGB people living in non-western societies.



framework to express the sex hierarchy, consisting of two concentric circles, which she termed the 'charmed circle' and 'the outer limit', representing the different cultural values attached to various sexualities (see figure 2.1). Rubin (1984) suggests that behaviours which were constructed as 'good' and 'natural' and in the charmed circle, included sexualities that were heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, non-commercial, in pairs, in a relationship, same generation, in private, vanilla<sup>5</sup>, includes only bodies and excludes pornography. In comparison sexual behaviours which were deemed 'bad' and 'abnormal' and resided in the 'outer limits', included homosexuality, being unmarried, promiscuous, and non-procreative. Having sex that was commercial, casual, in groups, cross-generational (i.e. relationships with significant age gaps), public, with material objects, or sadomasochistic was also considered to be unnatural.

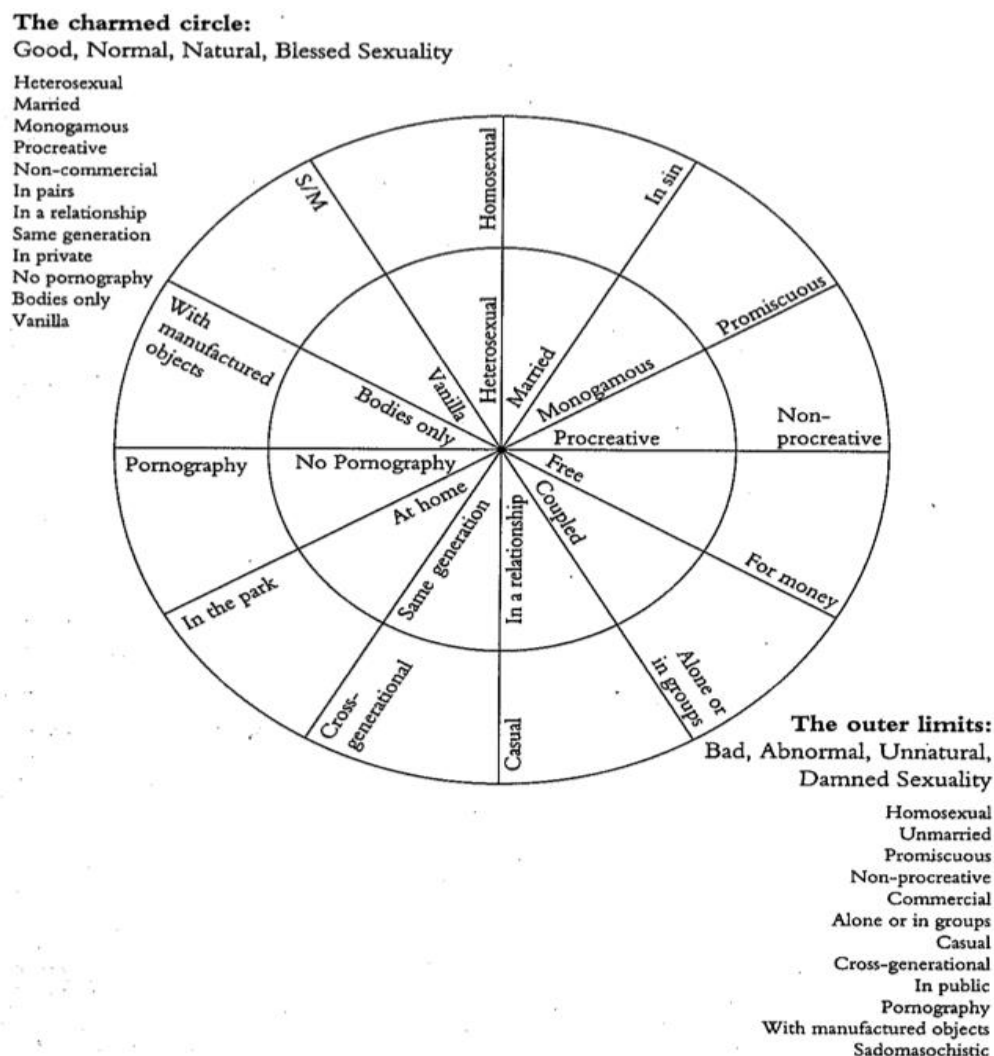


Figure 2.1. Rubin's (1984) Hierarchy of Sexual Value source

<sup>5</sup> Vanilla refers to sex that is defined as conventional sexual activity (such as the missionary position between heterosexual couples) and without elements of sadomasochism, kink, or fetish.

Rubin (1984) suggests that discourses of sexual judgement be that religious, psychiatric, popular or political, portray sexual behaviours in the charmed circle as the only safe, healthy, normal, legal, and correct sexuality. In contrast, Rubin (1984) argues that any behaviour which violates these socially sanctioned rules is portrayed as unhealthy and immoral. Rubin (1984) stresses that this pluralistic and extremely punitive social hierarchy of sexuality, is problematic as it places 'very real formal and informal controls' on sex, and is highly oppressive for minorities that reside on the outskirts of morality (p. 150). However, Rubin (1984) also indicates that the line between 'good' and 'bad' sex is being continuously reconstituted by the various discourses on sex, and she draws on the example of homosexuality to show how those in monogamous same-sex relationships (and now same-sex married couples in the UK) have become more socially acceptable having moved towards the charmed circle. Rubin's work points towards the importance of situating coming out experiences within particular historical context.

### *Where is the joy?*

When we look at the earlier research, I suggest that it is possible to see how coming out and living openly as LGB individuals, particularly in relation to families, has been presented in a largely negative light. Rejection and suffering has become one of the defining stories of the disclosure narrative, illustrated and reinforced by persuasive accounts of worry, fear, and stress for LGBs, and disappointment, intolerance, and rejection from parents. As Savin-Williams (2001) suggests, 'no task is perceived as more intricate, treacherous, or omnipresent as disclosing to parents' (p. 25). According to Savin-Williams (1998) many LGB youths have little expectation that their parents will accept or support them and as such, they fear being 'disowned, rejected, thrown out of the home, or emotionally and physically harassed' (p. 75). Given the expectation that parents will respond negatively, it is not surprising that coming out and revealing sexual identities to parents has been seen to provoke considerable anxiety for LGB individuals (Ben-Ari 1995; Herdt and Boxer 1993), especially when relationships with parents are deemed so important.

As indicated previously, while some sociologists have argued that an understanding of families has changed, they suggest that there continues to be an emphasis upon the importance of family life. When families are constructed as fundamentally important for providing love and support, including material, practical, and emotional, as Finch and Mason (1993) suggest, it is perhaps not surprising that young LGBs have strong desires to maintain positive connections with their parents. However, as Valentine *et*

*al* (2003) indicate, as most heterosexual parents will assume that their children are also heterosexual, young LGBs are fearful that their sexuality will put their relationships at risk, disappoint or hurt their parents, and put them in awkward positions with other relatives, friends, and neighbours (see also Cramer and Roach 1988; Savin-Williams 1998). Valentine *et al* (2003) suggest that the decisions people make about coming out are often tied up in loyalties and commitments to the family, explaining why many young LGBs choose to stay closeted from their families.

Research has however, highlighted the damaging personal consequences of hiding sexual identities from those you are close to. Weston (1991), for example, indicates that being secretive can have detrimental consequences for the bonds between family members. Secrets and lies work to undermine 'the trust considered a prerequisite for "close" connections', creating 'barriers that interject "distance" into relationships' (Weston 1991 p. 50). Valentine and Skelton (2003), also point to the devastating psychological affects that the closet can have on young people, including problems with low self-esteem, confidence, emotional development, depression and self-hatred. They suggest that these difficulties can manifest into self-destructive behaviours, such as excessive drinking, drug-taking, committing crime, risky sexual practices, and suicide attempts.

Despite the reality of the closet for some LGBs, research has suggested that a significant proportion of lesbian and gay people do come out to their parents. A survey by the once dominant US print magazine Advocate<sup>6</sup> for example, indicates that of the 5,000 American respondents two-thirds of LGBs had come out to their mothers and almost half to their fathers (Lever 1994; 1995). Some of the reasons that have been reported for coming out ranged from wanting to build closer and more transparent relationships with family members (Ben-Ari 1995), to being more psychology healthy and having better self-esteem (Cain 1991), and validating same-sex partner relationships (Laird 1993; LaSala 2000b; LaSala 2010). Research suggests that disclosure to all family members rarely happens all at once, but is often staggered in relation to the connections that LGB have with certain family members (e.g. where they are close to them, or perceive them to be homophobic) (see Valentine *et al.*, 2003). Numerous scholars have insinuated that LGBs are more likely to come out to their mothers more than, or before their fathers, and that mothers are often the first to be told in the family (D'Augelli 2005; Savin-Williams 1998; Savin-Williams 2001; Toomey and Richardson 2009; Valentine *et al.*, 2003). Valentine *et al* (2003) suggest that the reason LGB's choose to come out to their mothers first is because they often

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<sup>6</sup> The Advocate is a US-based national gay and lesbian magazine, aimed at a educated, affluent and politically aware audience sold since 2010 as a supplement with a subscription to Out magazine (Savin-Williams 1998).

help their LGB children to come out to others. Mothers have also been seen to play an importance role in managing family reactions to sexuality in the family (Valentine *et al.*, 2003).

A review of the literature and anecdotal writings that narrate the reactions of parents when they discover that their child will not fulfil heterosexual expectations, suggests that the concerns and anxieties that young people have about rejection are well founded. Research which has accounted for the experiences of LGBs who have come out to their parents has painted a bleak picture. As Beeler and DiProva (1999) indicate, 'disclosure frequently creates a crisis within the family' (p. 443) and can 'lead to rejection, estrangement, and maltreatment' (p. 444). LaSala (2000b), for example, found that almost all of the male participants (36 out of 40) in his study were met with disapproval, hostility, or distress when they came out to their parents. Further research has suggested that young LGBs can be subjected to violence and harassment at the hands of their parents. Hunter (1990), for example, indicates that 61% of violence that was experienced by the gays and lesbian in his research came from family members. Pilkington and D'Augelli (1995) similarly indicate that over 60% of youths from their community support group sample received some degree of verbal or physical assault from their families. Their research demonstrated that girls were more likely than boys to be physically assaulted, and mothers (22%) were the most frequent perpetrators. A study by Boxer *et al* (1991) revealed that approximately 10% of gay young people who had disclosed their sexualities to their fathers had been thrown out of their homes.

Much of the academic work on coming out, has also accounted for the reactions of, and consequences for parents when they discover that they have a gay or lesbian child. Disclosure has been argued to profoundly impact upon parents. As the following powerful and quite shocking quotation illustrates, parent's well-being and sense of selves are often tied up in patterns of disclosure.

My wife and I felt like our world had come to an end. We hit the depths of our emotions. We had guilty feelings and thought that everything we had done with our children was wrong. For a brief time, we even thought about mutual suicide (Griffin *et al.*, 1996 p. 2)

Although it has been acknowledged that family reactions are individualistic and will vary from person to person (Williamson 1998), research on parents has presented grief as a central emotion in experiences of disclosure, as illustrated in the previous quote. A number of grief and mourning stage modules have

been developed within psychology to describe common reactions of parents once they discover their child is LGB. These models emerged out of popular psychology books that were very common and familiar to the reading public in the 80s and 90s. Savin-Williams (2001) notes that in these models parents supposedly react with symptoms of grief and mourning, processing through a series of stages similar to those described by Kubler-Ross (1969) after the shock of learning of one's own impending death; denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Goldfried and Goldfried (2001) illustrate the presence of these types of emotions in many of the parental narratives.

[Parents] may feel anger and resentment, blaming their son or daughter for “doing this” to them – as if it were a choice. They may blame themselves, wondering how and where they went wrong. They may fear for the social, personal, and physical well-being of their child and what might be in store for him or her. They may worry what friends, relatives, and neighbours will think if they learnt of this (Goldfried and Goldfried 2001 p. 684).

These grief models, although understood to be far too simplistic, individualistic, and not illustrative of many experiences (Savin-Williams 2001), reinforce the idea that parents often blame themselves or feel angry towards their LGB children for not adhering to heteronormativity and that LGBs may be subjected to the consequences of this fear, worry and possible humiliation.

Scholars have drawn attention to a number of reasons that parents cite for responding negatively to having an LGB child. The quotation by Goldfried and Goldfried (2001) above reinforces the idea that parents often struggle to find appropriate emotions due to the personal, social and family conflicts that they experience when their LGB children reveal their sexuality to them. One of the most prominent reasons for parental difficulties with acceptance, as cited within the literature on coming out, was the loss of the imagined futures that parents had for themselves and for their children. The expectations that parents have for their children's future emerge as being vitally important in the family, especially as these expectations shape the (heterosexual) paths people are expected to follow. LaSala (2010) suggests that parents have explicit hopes and dreams for their child's future, including the type of person they will become, the jobs they will have, as well as ‘future weddings, grandchildren – a ‘normal’ happy family life with all the white picket fence trimmings’ (p. 85). The persuasive tendency for western cultures to sustain this heterosexual family myth (Herdt and Koff 2000), or the normative expectation

that children will be heterosexual and will get married and have children, means that some parents mourn for the image of who their child was going to be. This is articulated by some of the parents in Salzburg's (2004) study. As the mother of a gay son recalled:

I think that the first year of really knowing – you know, having it out in the open – is really, really hard. It's like the death of a child that you thought was going to grow up and be the way you always thought about. All your dreams for this kid – you know, marriage, the whole bit – none of that is going to happen, and it all turns so suddenly. It finally hits you: All the dreams you had all the time he was growing up are gone forever, and he'll be a part of a life that is apart from yours and that you can never know (Salzburg 2004 p. 113)

Research has also suggested that disclosure can create a new sense of marginalization for the family, as they become associated with a discredited minority. Crosbie-Burnett *et al* (1996), for example, demonstrate that parents can fear the social consequences of having a stigmatised child, as it can make them feel more vulnerable and sensitive to homophobia or anti-gay sentiment and can change the way that the family is portrayed in society. They suggest that when a family member comes out; 'the family has shifted its position from the safety of being part of the mainstream heterosexual world and the dominant culture to having lost the status of being a 'normal' family (Crosbie-Burnett *et al.*, 1996 p. 399). Several heterosexual family members in Baptist and Allen's (2008) case study echo similar feelings of marginalisation through their association with having a LGB child or sibling. As the mother of the gay son indicated; 'We're a minority. We may be an invisible minority... People, eh, might not like us (in a sad and anxious tone)' (Baptist and Allen 2008 p. 102). As hinted here, some parents are concerned that they may become targets of social disapproval, or will be blamed for their child's stigmatised identity (LaSala 2010). The fear of parental marginalisation through association, is what Goffman (1963) terms 'courtesy stigma', by which he means the 'tendency for stigma to spread from the stigmatized individual to his [sic] close connections' (p. 30). Recognising that 'homosexuals' possess certain attributes, and an 'undesired differentness' (p. 15) from what is expected, which discredits them and renders them inferior in the eyes of others, Goffman (1963) suggests that homosexual stigma has the potential to not only affect 'spoilt' individuals, but also those he defines as 'the wise'. Goffman (1963) categorises the wise as 'normal' people who share an affiliation with those regarded as having a 'spoiled identity', such as parents of LGBs.

Parents may also be concerned that their children will be discriminated against, harassed, lonely, promiscuous, and unsafe (Beeler and DiProva 1999; Conley 2011; Willoughby *et al.*, 2008). Conley (2011) however, notes that parents often have a higher concern for the safety of their sons than daughters, which she argues is a reflection of the greater social acceptance towards lesbianism over gay men.

The process of coming out and the reactions that parents have to disclosure has also been argued to be shaped and complicated by issues of gender, class, ethnicity, culture, place, and the nature of the family system. Research examining the coming out process in a multicultural context has, for example, emphasised some of the unique challenges and considerations that black and ethnic minority LGBs have to face when disclosing to their families. For example, Merighi and Grimes (2000) illustrate how culture can both hamper and facilitate disclosure, for young gay men. They suggest that young people can experience tension and conflict between embracing their own queer identities, while also respecting the cultural heritage of their family. Merighi and Grimes (2000) identify concerns that some gay men had about the effects of their sexuality on the social standing of their family, and the way they chose to protect them from shame by delaying disclosing and remaining in the closet, similar to those in Valentine *et al.*'s (2003) work. However, Merighi and Grimes (2000) also suggest that important cultural values, such as unconditional love and support for children, helped to facilitate disclosure for ethnic minority men as they believed that their families would still care for them, despite their sexual identities. Bernstein and Reimann (2001) also illustrate some of the greater risks of being out to families in a multi-cultural context, particularly where there is less emphasis on the pursuit of individualism and the need for refuge from a racist society.

It is not just the coming out process which has been presented as a difficult process, but rather living openly and performing LGB identities, particularly within family spaces has also been understood to be complex and to have consequences for the entire family network. Drawing upon Butler's (1990) notion of performativity, geographers of sexuality have for example, investigated issues of surveillance and discretion around the performance of LGB sexualities in spaces and places, such as in the home. Alluding to the way that the home is discursively constructed as a heterosexual space, with clear heteronormative norms and values 'naturalised through repetition and regulation' (Valentine 1996 p. 146), geographers of sexuality have explored how LGB sexualities are pushed to the margins of these spaces, highlighting how difficult this is for LGBs. The family home is portrayed as a domestic

environment that is discursively, symbolically, and materially constructed (Blunt and Varley 2004). It is a place that is loaded with multiple associations and 'invested with meanings, emotions, experiences, and relationships that lie at the heart of human life'. (p. 3). According to Johnson and Valentine, the home is popularly constructed as 'a private, secret location, a sanctuary, a locus of identity and a place where inhabitants can escape the disciplinary practices that regulate our bodies in everyday life' (p. 88). Although there is a sense that the home is a private heaven from the outside world, a place where people are able to be 'free from surveillance' (Saunders 1989 p. 184), Johnson and Valentine (1995) suggest that the home is not free from scrutiny when it comes to the performance of non-normative gender and sexuality.

Drawing on an understanding that heterosexual power is expressed in private spaces, such as the home, Valentine (1993a) for example, notes how, for some lesbian women, the home was not a place where they could freely express their sexualities through a fear of conflict and hostility. Instead, Valentine (1993a) identified the different and contradictory sexual identities that lesbians created in different times and different spaces, as a way of managing potential tension with their heterosexual families. This included establishing 'geographical boundaries between past and present identities' by moving away and distancing themselves from places where they had a known heterosexual identity, to living in new communities where they could come out and create lesbian identities among strangers (Valentine 1993a p. 243). In the family home however, having to maintain dual identities, or being placed in what Valentine *et al* (2003) term 'paradoxical space' (p.494), meaning that being both in and out the closet was stressful and anxiety-provoking for these women. As the family home was also understood to be a site where lesbians felt pressure to either conform or hide their sexual identities, women reported altering the layout and decoration of their private spaces in order to successfully hide signifiers of their sexual identities, such as books or pictures, from those who visited their homes (Valentine 1993a; 1993b). This necessity to conceal identity or deliberately misrepresent sexuality by the display of heterosexual markers was particularly important for young lesbians who were living at home with their parents, and had not come out (Valentine 1993b). For these lesbian women:

The family home symbolised everything they do not want or are unable to be and the family home for many lesbians is therefore not where the heart is but the place they need to escape from to express their hearts desire (Valentine 1993b p. 400).



As Valentine (1993b) suggests here, the consequence of the pressure to self-regulate and conceal their sexual identities meant that the family home could be a site of alienation for lesbians who did not conform to the hyper-visible heteronormative norms and values embedded in traditional understandings, and everyday practices of the family.

Noting that the home is one of the sites where identities are performed and monitored, Johnson and Valentine (1995) similarly argue that for lesbian women, the parental home is a place where they have to 'manage the clash of their identity as a lesbian with their identity as 'daughter' from a heterosexual family' (p.87). Drawing upon understandings of lesbian spaces, with women discussing their own family homes, Johnson and Valentine (1995) suggest that under the watchful gaze of other family members, lesbians often have to restrict and censor the performance of their identity. This includes concealing cultural markers - 'hiding pictures of lesbian icon kd lang under the mattress and gay fiction behind the bookcase', as a way of maintaining the secret of their sexuality (p. 90). Johnson and Valentine (1995) also note that the performance of a lesbian sexuality is not just restricted to the boundaries of the bedroom, but are tied up in other embodied regulations. Drawing on Bulter's (1990) notion of the body, as a set of variable boundaries 'a surface whose permeability is politically regulated' (p. 177), which is inscribed within historical and cultural understandings of gender hierarchies and compulsory heterosexuality, Johnson and Valentine (1995) illustrate how the home can shape and restrict the lesbian body by giving examples of women who covered up their tattoos, or dressed more conservatively in their parental home. According to Johnson and Valentine (1995) this struggle to hide and self-regulate their behaviour from the surveillance of parents 'can rob the parental home of its meanings as a place of 'privacy', 'roots', and 'paradise'...it is a location where lesbianism and heterosexual do battle' (p. 101).

Geographers drawing from Foucault (1977) suggest that when alternative sexualities are performed in heterosexual spaces, they are subjected to patterns of surveillance and discipline. Foucault (1977) argues that discipline operates as a mechanism of disciplinary power which regulates and controls the behaviours of individuals in given social institutions through meticulous techniques of monitoring and surveillance. Foucault (1977) states that the chief function of disciplinary power is to 'train' individuals to self-regulate in order to fit into the ethos of any given social institution (such as prisons, schools, hospitals). Discipline then, 'is a set of strategies, procedures and ways of behaving which are associated with certain institutional contexts and which then permeate ways of thinking and behaving in general' (Mills 2003 p. 44). When applying this concept of surveillance to the research on performances

of sexuality in the home (as explored above) it is possible to see how LGBs regulate their behaviours as though they are being constantly watched by their heterosexual parents. LGBs often choose to conceal as a way of either hiding their sexuality, or manage it within the context of hostile or disapproving families. The consequences of concealment are however quite vast, with LGBs often losing the sense of home as a haven.

What this body of literature on coming out to parents suggests is that there is a great deal at stake for LGB children in disclosing their sexual identities and living openly. This repeated emphasis upon negative coming out stories; the 'trauma youths incur when they disclose to parents, or the consequences of disclosing, and the stages that parents experience in coping with this unsettling news' (Savin-Williams 2001 p. 25), has perpetuated the idea that that homophobia and rejection from families is the most likely and the most legitimate experience of coming out. This is recognised by Savin-Williams (2001).

Researchers, clinicians, educators, and health care professionals frequently highlight the pain of living – and the hardships sexual-minority youths encounter – without saying a word about their resilience or diversity... gay youths have been almost solely presented as victims who are necessarily harassed at home and in school, as gender benders with multi-coloured hair and multipierced bodies and as mutilators of their own lives by placing themselves at risk for HIV and suicide (Savin-Williams 2001 p. xi).

However, it is important to recognise that much of this research on coming out to families is between 10 and 25 years old. As such, it tells us a considerable amount about the context of LGB families for young people at that time. Yet what this literature does not do is capture some of the contemporary changes to society and the way that this has impacted upon disclosure. I argue that by taking account of some of the recent coming out literatures, it is possible to see that rejection is not a universal and time bound experience in families. Instead, we can start to see that there may well be family members who do not reject or want to miss out on the LGB family member's lives.

### *Turning of Tides?*

Valentine *et al* (2003) suggest that the historical transformation of sexuality and the way in which modernity has freed individuals from the constraints of traditional sexual norms, has generated more prospects for lesbian and gay men to come out and live their lifestyle of choice and has provided new opportunities for the pursuit of happiness, (see Beck 1992, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, Giddens 1991). Weeks' (2007) pioneering work has for example, traced the significant social, cultural, and legal changes that have occurred in Britain since the 1950s that have impacted upon the way in which LGBs live. He suggests that the repeal of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, the passing of anti-discrimination legislation in employment, as well as the Civil Partnership Act 2004 and the Adoption and Children's Act 2002 (which allows LGB individuals and/or couples to adopt), has shaped, and been shaped by increasingly liberal social attitudes towards sex and sexuality, altering the way that LGBTs experience their lives. More recently, the passing of the Marriage (Same Sex) Act 2013 could also be added to this list of social change. Weeks (2007) proposes that these changes, generated in part by the development of a modern liberal society, are suggestive of the altering or weakening of the homosexual/heterosexual binary.

Homosexuality always necessarily exists in symbiotic relationship, frequently as the threatening Other, with heterosexuality. The sharp binary schism between the two that has structured, defined, and distorted our sexual regime for the past few centuries, and perhaps reached a peak with the final determined reassertion of what has been descried as a 'heterosexual dictatorship' in the 1950s, is now profoundly undermined as millions of gays and lesbians, bisexual and transgendered people have not so much subverted the established order as lived as if their sexual difference did not, in the end, matter (Weeks 2007 p. 9).

As a consequence of the shift in social attitudes towards LGBs, 'it is understood to be 'easier' to be lesbian or gay now than at any time in the past' (Valentine *et al.*, 2003 p. 480). This is demonstrated by young LGBs disclosing their sexualities more frequently and at younger ages. Toomey and Richardson (2009), for example, indicate that the average age that their respondents came out to their relatives was 17 years old, which is slightly lower than the average ages (18-19 years) reported in previous work (see Floyd & Stein, 2002; Savin-Williams, 1998).

A number of pioneering contemporary studies have also begun to shed critical light on the universal assumption of rejection from families, by accounting for alternative and more positive stories. There has been an important shift in the literature on coming out in recognising that parents and children co-exist within a web of connections which spans different generations, and that it is important to situate the coming out process within these wider familiar networks (Nordquist and Smart 2014).

Gorman-Murray's (2008) work is particularly illustrative. Taking issue with the normalisation of the family home as a homophobic space in academic and popular discourse, Gorman-Murray (2008) introduces alternative stories of disclosure by making a methodological decision to exclusively present the positive experiences of coming out to parents and siblings at home. Through a critical reading of autobiographical coming out narratives, he shows how some Australian families have responded with love, support, openness and even excitement. Gorman-Murray (2008) presents the story of Joo-Inn-Choo, a middle class Asian-Australian as an evocative illustration of support from family members:

My family... accepted my new [lesbian] relationship, with minimal difficulty and little surprise. Mum said it was fine with her, but she felt protective thinking that life would be much harder for me if I was gay. It was easy for my brother to understand as he was experiencing excruciating crushes on girls and we were able to compare notes. My sister just said 'Cool!' (p. 37).

Gorman-Murray (2008) suggests that these positive stories are demonstrative of homes becoming increasingly supportive environments for some young LGBs. Gorman-Murray's (2008) research therefore provides a useful and important platform for acknowledging the need to pay more attention to different stories of coming out at home, which are not entrenched in negativity. However, it is important to acknowledge that Gorman-Murray (2008) only focuses his attention on positive portrayals of coming out in the autobiographies in question without giving indicating whether LGBs were only ever accepted or if their coming out experiences were more complicated. In accounting for the positive stories his work could be critiqued for only presenting one part of a varied and diverse disclosure experience.

Other scholars have demonstrated similar accounts of acceptance, love and support. Drawing upon a number of case studies, Skelton and Valentine (2005), for example, focus on the stories of heterosexual fathers whose sons had come out to them as gay. Although they noted that some fathers did respond with denial or disapproval, many also revealed reactions of care and acceptance. For these

supportive fathers, their relationships with their sons were significantly strengthened. Nordquist and Smart (2014) investigated how lesbian and gay individuals negotiate wider family relationships at significant moments. They draw on three qualitative data sets collected in Britain in the 2000s, to investigate how lesbian and gays negotiate relationships with family members at significant moments. Although their work is framed around the notion of 'trouble' and therefore focused on the difficulties they experience in living openly in their families, they note that:

...there were important positive accounts in these data of wider families being accepting and supportive of their gay and lesbian family members, thus easing the process of 'coming out' (p. 98).

Valentine *et al* (2003), investigated the consequences of coming out in the family home using in-depth interviews with 20 young lesbian and gays, and 23 retrospective accounts of 'older' lesbian and gays. By distinguishing between positional families (i.e. traditional gendered division of power) and personalizing families (more equal in balances of power), Valentine *et al* (2003) gave examples of the positive accounts of disclosure that arose from participants within personalizing families. In these families where there was a balance of power, young people recalled how coming out allowed them to 'grow' in the eyes of their parents. As Valentine *et al* (2003) explain 'for these young people coming out repositioned them from being asexual children whose identities were dependent upon their parents, to being independent adults who had establish lifestyles and values that were distinct from the family' (p. 491). These parents then were not threatened, fearful or ashamed of their children's lesbian or gay identity, but were instead appreciative of the responsibility and emotional maturity their offspring had taken for their own lives. For some of the young people, this shift enabled them to transform and renegotiate positive and closer connections with family members.

However, that is not to say that accounts of difficulty are not recognised in this work. Indeed, Valentine *et al* (2003) illustrate that of the 43 participants, three-quarters reported negative reactions from one of their parents, and over half from both. These were reactions that were, at times, quite extreme as demonstrated by one of their participants:

He [his father] basically said that it was like the same as being a paedophile and never to tell my sister because if I did she wouldn't let me see her niece [meaning her daughter, his niece] anymore... and they [Robbie's parents] would support her

in that completely 'cos they would see me as like a really bad influence on her and I wouldn't be able to get a job and my life would be in the gutter (Valentine *et al.*, 2003 p. 488)

Valentine *et al* (2003) also demonstrated how fear of rejection, and family loyalty shaped the coming out process, with some young people choosing to stay in the closet as a way of protecting their parents from harm. As such, Valentine *et al* (2003) suggest that the coming out process is not something that is 'done in or to the family', by an individual, but is something that is 'negotiated both with other individuals and as a collectivity' (Valentine *et al.*, 2003 p. 487). It is these types of contentions with LGBs livingly openly in families, that has led Valentine *et al* (2003) to point to a more 'complex picture of the emotional functioning of the home' (p. 495). They suggest that these findings offer:

... a picture, in multiple shades of grey, of very differentiated family relationships, of emotional webs of guilt, shame, and anger, of failures to communicate, of the refusal of some members to acknowledge others' identities and relationships, and of an inability to define new ways of relating beyond heterosexual 'social' norms. (p. 495)

Nordquist and Smart's (2014) recent work on the trouble with coming out also notes the difficult experiences of coming out in families. While being explicit in noting that their data does not suggest that the majority of lesbian and gay people struggle to come out to their families, they were surprised to note the frequency of the subtle difficulties that can be experienced within family dynamics, highlighting some of the 'real' challenges gay and lesbians still face in living their lives openly in families.

We were struck by a strong sub-theme emerging that gay men and lesbians were also seen as 'troubling' and troublesome to their families... the desire to live lives as if 'sexual difference [does] not matter' has not yet been fully achieved (Nordquist and Smart 2014 p. 98).

Nordquist and Smart (2014) illustrate how hostile reactions to disclosure from parents can work to create a number of undesirable consequences for relationships with extended family members. Nordquist and Smart (2014) demonstrate how disclosure is more complex when parents 'block' relationships with other members of the family, 'put obstacles in the way of openness' and even 'create

fictions' concerning the lives of their lesbian and gay children (Nordquist and Smart 2014 p. 106). For example, Nordquist and Smart (2014) draw on the example of Emma, whose parents had chosen not to tell their friends or relatives about her sexuality, but had instead created a fictional account of her life.

Emma's parents have told all their family that Emma's with a man living in [city]. So, yes, he's called John. He's an engineer and there's this whole story is going on and they're adamant that they're not going to go back on that story... they know exactly what the truth is, but they're choosing not to tell it (p. 106).

Nordquist and Smart (2014) also suggest that living openly has the potential to destabilise complete networks of familial relationships, as they demonstrate in the following example:

I knew her father had taken it very badly [when his daughter started a relationship with a woman] and for several years refused to speak to her – or about her to others. This was very distressing for the rest of the family, especially the older generation, who although they didn't really understand about B's 'new' sexuality, wanted to go on as before, and her father's behaviour made this very difficult (p. 106).

As this extract demonstrates, a hostile reaction from a parent can impact upon other relationships within the family, causing strain to these connections. Re-emphasising early arguments from Ponse (1976) and Finch and Mason (1993), Nordquist and Smart (2014) were also surprised to note how many families, who were not comfortable with their LGB member, managed the identities of their LGB children through the 'avoidance, silence or non-discussion' of their sexualities (p. 107). This meant that many LGBs had to live out their lives through the discretion or concealment of their identity or same-sex relationships within the context of their *private* lives. It was these types of subtleties that led Nordquist and Smart (2014) to conclude that in order to understand the coming out process, it is important to investigate the meaning of non-heterosexuality in family relationality and situate the lives of gays and lesbians in webs of intergenerational relationships.

This more recent scholarship on coming out to families has demonstrated the need to be attentive to the different social contexts in which people come out, as a way seeing some of the subtle nuances in the family coming out story. While it is clear to see that coming out and negotiating new identities in

families is still difficult for some, this literature also shows that rejection is not a universal experience. When the research gaze is shifted and begins to account for entire intergenerational connections, what we see is stories of acceptance, love, and support for LGB family members. The following section continues to consider diverse coming out experiences within wider family networks, by looking at the emerging body of research on sibling disclosures.

### **Section Three: The Sibling Coming Out Experience**

In this final section, I outline and critically discuss some of the emerging work that has begun to conceptualise the sibling coming out experience. This includes engaging with coming out research in families that has included sibling categories. I also consider the small body of research that has directly focused on sibling experiences, highlighting factors which influence disclosure, the reactions of siblings, and some of the changes to sibling relationships.

Some of the literature explored in the previous section on experiences of coming out to parents, were also attentive to analysis on siblings (D'Augelli 1991; D'Augelli *et al.*, 1998; D'Augelli *et al.*, 2008; Savin-Williams 1998). Within this body of literature, evidence suggests that siblings represent a potential target for the disclosure of their brother or sisters LGB sexuality as much as, if not more, than parents (Cramer and Roach 1988; Savin-Williams 1998; Strommen 1989; Toomey and Richardson 2009). When reviewing the experiences of family disclosure from two college samples and three urban studies, Savin-Williams (1998), for example, indicates that 40-50% of the adolescents had revealed their sexuality to their siblings. D'Augelli (1991), in his study of identity processes among self-identified gay men in college, similarly notes that 42% of his sample had come out to a sister and 17% to a brother. In a later study D'Augelli *et al* (1998) also highlight that 64% of young (14-21 year olds) LGBs who were living at home, had come out to their siblings. Certain demographic characteristics, such as birth order and gender, were considered to be significant when analysing disclosure patterns. As D'Augelli *et al* (2008) suggest, LGB young people were more likely to be out to their sisters (66%) rather than their brothers (59%), and older siblings were more likely to have been told than younger siblings (see also D'Augelli 1991; Toomey and Richardson 2009).

An interesting trend presented in this literature was the likelihood of LGB siblings coming out to their heterosexual brothers and sisters before anyone else in the family. It is proposed that LGB youths may come out to their siblings first to test the reactions of family members, (Jenkins 2008) helping them to modify the manner in which they disclose their sexuality to others, or because they expected their



siblings to be more supportive (Beaty 1999; Cramer and Roach 1988; Rossi 2010; Stommen 1989; Weston 1991). Savin-Williams (1998) does, however, note that empirical support concerning the likelihood of first disclosure and the reasons that drive this are very limited. When siblings are the first to be told about their brother's or sister's LGB identity, Murray (1994, cited in Demo and Allen, 1996) indicates that the multiple layers of invisibility and secret keeping in the family can work to strengthen and strain sibling connections. On the one hand, relationships between heterosexual and LGB siblings can deepen and become more intimate and positive over time, as they share a common secret and demonstrate trust. These are core elements that Jamieson (1988) suggests are at the heart of modern intimate relationships. Yet on the other hand, Crosbie-Burnett *et al* (1996) indicate that siblings can experience a 'burden of knowing' (p.398), meaning that receiving this privileged knowledge ahead of others may create awkward situations for siblings. As Savin-Williams (1998) explains:

Should they tell parents or other siblings? Should they be a part of the deception and lie or make excuses for their sister or brother? How do they offer support to their gay sibling? How do they cope with the stigma of someone with a "fag" brother or "dyke" sister? (p. 57).

The apprehension of siblings is perhaps understandable when framed in light of Carol Smart's (2007, 2009) work on secrets and family relationships. Drawing on Foucault's *The Will to Truth*, Smart (2007; 2009) argues that truth-telling occupies an important role in the experience of modern personal life and the way it is expected to be lived. She suggests that there is an assumption that healthy and good relationships are reliant on the sharing of one's most 'authentic' hidden core. Smart (2009) argues that when truth is understood to be the only acceptable basis for 'proper' intimate connections, then 'deceiving those with whom one has a close relationship is seen to automatically to jeopardise the quality of the bond and to undermine genuine feelings' (p. 552). Smart's work perhaps helps to explain why heterosexual siblings may feel a strain in their relationships with parents and other family members, as they need to lie to them in order to keep their LGB siblings sexual secret.

This body of literature on disclosure has also shown the variety of ways that siblings have reacted to having a LGB brother or sister. Some research has portrayed a positive picture by suggesting that siblings accept and support their LGB brothers and sisters. In D'Augelli's (1991) sample, 75% of siblings were accepting of their brothers or sisters sexuality, in comparison to only 15% who reported being rejected by a sibling. Over half (57%) of the participants in D'Augelli *et al*'s (1998) research also

indicated that their siblings were 'fully accepting' of their sexuality, while only 11% were understood to be rejecting<sup>7</sup> (p. 367). As noted in the previous section, Gorman-Murray (2008) shows how some siblings (and parents) respond to disclosure with love, support, openness and excitement. In relation to siblings, he suggests that heterosexual brothers and sisters can be 'overwhelmingly supportive...having little difficulty accepting a GLB sibling' (Gorman-Murray 2008 p. 37). Existing research also suggests that siblings can respond in negative ways, by rejecting or being abusive towards their LGB brothers and sisters when they come out. Gender was deemed an important factor, with D'Augelli *et al*'s (2008) research indicating that male siblings were significantly more negative and rejecting about an LGB sibling's sexual identity, when compared to sisters. D'Augelli *et al* (1998) similarly demonstrates that brothers were the most common assailants of abuse towards LGB siblings, with 22% reported being verbally abusive, 14% physically threatening, and 7% physically abusive.

This collection of literature that has included siblings as part of an analysis on wider family coming out experiences has provided an important, although limited platform for mapping sibling accounts of disclosure. The last decade has however, witnessed a growing interest in sibling coming out stories, with scholars attempting to exclusively explore the sibling experiences of disclosure, in their own right.

Toomey and Richardson's (2009) research, for example, aimed to provide descriptive information concerning the relationships of American sexual minority youths (aged 18-24) and their siblings. Drawing upon a quantitative research design, including the use of questionnaires, the Adopted Sibling Closeness Scale and the Sibling Approval Sexual Behaviour Scale, the authors analysed data from 56 lesbian, gay or bisexuals about the relationships that they had with their brothers and sisters. Toomey and Richardson (2009) raise several important points about the coming out process and sibling relationships. They captured an interesting trend towards young people coming out to family members at an earlier age (17 years), suggesting that LGBs are increasingly disclosing whilst still living at home with their parents and siblings. Echoing earlier research (e.g. Beaty 1999; Cramer and Roach 1988; Jenkins 2008; Stommen 1989), Toomey and Richardson (2009) also demonstrate that LGBs were more likely to come out to their siblings before their parents, and to their sisters ahead of their brothers. They also show that sexual minority youths were more likely to come out to their brothers or sisters if they had had a close relationship prior to disclosure.

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that the authors did not give any indication of what was meant by 'fully accepting' or 'rejecting'.

Focusing upon sibling reactions, Toomey and Richardson (2009) indicate that the closer the relationship, the more likely it is that heterosexual siblings will be more approving and accepting of their LGB brother or sister. They make a positive connection between gender and levels of sibling approval and closeness, proposing that both male and female participants perceived their sisters to be more accepting of their LGB identities and sexual behaviours, when compared to their brothers. These findings led Toomey and Richardson (2009) to conclude that the relationship between young LGBs and their siblings remain salient and 'relatively strong' after the coming out process, providing LGBs with an essential supportive network in the family (p. 858).

Hilton and Szymanski's (2011) research aimed to explore the changing dynamics that occur in sibling relationships following the disclosure of lesbian and gay sexualities. One of the unique methodological qualities of Hilton and Szymanski's (2011) study was that they recruited 14 heterosexual siblings who reported on their experiences of having lesbian and gay brothers or sisters, rather than relying upon lesbian and gay participants to tell the story of coming out as much of the existing research has done (Savin-Williams and Dube 1998). Hilton and Szymanski (2011) drew attention to ten central themes which illustrate how heterosexual siblings reacted to disclosure, and how they experienced changes in the relationships over time. Similar to stories of parents (see Baptist and Allen 2008; Heatherington and Lavner 2008; Phillips and Ancis 2008; Savin-Williams 2001), Hilton and Szymanski (2011) indicate that the majority of heterosexual siblings responded with feelings of shock, mostly related to a lack of exposure or knowledge about LGB lives. Others reported feelings of difference or 'foreignness' towards their LG brothers or sister, creating more distance in their relationships. Interestingly though, Hilton and Szymanski (2011) also captured the experiences of siblings who responded with acceptance and happiness. A small number of their participants spoke of being pleased for their lesbian and gay siblings and the majority recalled being concerned or protective towards their sibling after they came out. Hilton and Szymanski's (2011) analysis also revealed that heterosexual siblings can be sensitive to manifestations of heterosexism or a lack of acceptance from others (particularly parents) and how heterosexual siblings can become important allies in confronting and challenging perpetrators, even if this was risky for their own family relationships.

Hilton and Szymanski (2011) also suggest that, disclosure can improve the quality of sibling relationships, 'bringing them closer together' (p. 301). The majority of participants in their study felt that disclosure enabled their lesbian and gay siblings to be more open, meaning that they could be sensitive, emphatic and supportive towards the issues they were facing. There were only two

participants who recalled how disclosure created further distance in relationships, but these were connections that were already difficult. Hilton and Szymanski (2011) point out the importance of studying the impact of coming out over time, by showing how some heterosexual siblings became more comfortable with having a lesbian or gay sibling.

In a later study, Hilton and Szymanski (2014) focus specifically on heterosexual sibling accounts of acceptance. Using an online survey (with 189 respondents), Hilton and Szymanski (2014) investigate what correlates acceptance of lesbian and gay sexualities. The authors suggest that it is important to understand more about sibling acceptance, which has been seldom explored, as rejection from families has been seen to have quite serious consequences for lesbian or gay individuals. The findings from Hilton and Szymanski's (2014) research suggest that greater quality in sibling relationships in adulthood, pre-existing contact with lesbian and gay individuals, greater knowledge of LGBT communities and more support of civil rights, alongside some important demographic variables, such as being female, having a higher level of education, not being religious, and having more of a liberal political view, all impacts upon the greater acceptance of LGB brothers and sisters.

The work by Toomey and Richardson (2009) and Hilton and Szymanski (2011; 2014) goes some way in addressing the marginalisation of siblings in traditional coming out stories. From Toomey and Richardson's (2009) research, it is possible to conclude that siblings are heavily implicated in the process of disclosure and that gender, birth order and notions of closeness can impact upon the experience of coming out. Hilton and Szymanski's (2011) research draws attention to the subtle and distinctive changes that occur over time in the sibling connection, following the disclosure of LGB sexualities. Their work makes an important contribution to wider critiques of the literature on coming out; namely the negative discourse in family coming out stories (Gorman-Murray 2008; Savin-Williams 2001), by emphasising the positive experiences of coming out to siblings. Hilton and Szymanski (2011; 2014) demonstrate that siblings can be accepting of their LG brothers and sisters, and that disclosure can create better, closer bonds between them over time. However, there are a number of limitations which call into question the usefulness of this work.

Methodologically, both sets of researchers focus on individualistic accounts of coming out (i.e. recruiting LG people or heterosexual siblings instead of both or even entire family systems), replicating an existing critique by Valentine *et al* (2003) that much of the academic literature frames disclosure as

an individual decision, rather than a process embedded in the 'doing' of family (Morgan 1996; 1999). In order to move away from a singular perception of the coming out experience, Valentine *et al* (2003) suggest that it is important to consider disclosure 'with, and in, families of origin' to account for the ways that LGBs 'negotiate their identities with others, and the consequences of such disclosures for those who are close to them or share their lives' (p. 471). By focusing on either the stories of young LGB individuals or the heterosexual siblings of LGBs, rather than on the interconnected nature of these relationships, Toomey and Richardson's (2009) and Hilton and Szymanski's (2011; 2014) research does not account for the process of coming out and the impact that this has upon relationships *between* brothers and sisters over time. Furthermore, in investigating factors which impact upon patterns of sibling acceptance, Hilton and Szymanski (2014) draw upon a convenience sample in which most of the respondents were recruited from LG support groups. The authors themselves recognise the limitations of using this sample, as participants are more likely to be accepting of their LG brothers or sisters.

One of the limitations of Hilton and Szymanski's (2011) research is that they present their findings concerning the identity development of a sibling with an LGB brother or sister in a linear format. Writing from a developmental perspective, they talk about how heterosexual siblings move from one identified stage (or theme) to another without consideration or acknowledgement of any nuance or deviation in reactions. This was made clear in the discussion section of their paper.

The siblings in this study appeared to describe a process in which they initially experienced a reaction to the disclosure of shock or, for a small minority, happiness, and acceptance. This was followed by looking back and, in hindsight, noting LG stereotypical characteristics that assisted in confirming the disclosure. These reactions were then followed by a sense of protectiveness or concern for their siblings' future as a sexual minority and the idea that being LG meant that the sibling was different from them (Hilton and Szymanski's 2011 p. 306).

In using stage or linear models of development in the process of coming out, Hilton and Szymanski (2011) lose the stories of siblings who move back and forward between different reactions and the reasons for this. Existing research has already troubled some of the linear narratives concerning parental coming out experiences. Goldfried and Goldfried (2001), for example, illustrate the complexity of parental acceptance and the importance of considering how certain events or factors can impact

upon responses to their LGB children. They give the example of the introduction of same-sex partners and how this can shock even the most accepting parents; 'at one family dinner when his son referred to his partner as "hon", the father became so distracted that he started serving the salad with his hands!', and cause them to reevaluate how they feel about having gay or lesbian child (Goldfried and Goldfried 2001 p. 685). The complexity of parental acceptance, as demonstrated by Goldfried and Goldfried (2001) highlights the need to present disclosure, not as a one off event that evokes a single distinctive reaction, but rather as a 'a long and windy road' (Davies 1992 p. 75), which can change according to time, place, context, and circumstance.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of the literature on coming out has shown there to be a significant flaw at the heart of conventional theorizing about sibling relationships and sexuality. Despite the fascination and importance of sibling bonds, in the research literature, I have drawn attention to the widespread disregard of the experience of siblings in traditional accounts of family disclosure. Scholars have drawn attention to the dominance of the parent-child story and the reactions that parents have, rather than a focus on siblings or families as a whole (see D'Augelli *et al.*, 2008; Hilton and Szymanski 2011; Savin-Williams 1998; Toomey and Richardson 2009). This chapter has also demonstrated that the stories that have been told about coming out to parents are often discursively constructed negatively, neglecting the range of experiences, both positive and negative within families and over time. A significant proportion of literature on coming out reinforces a rhetoric about the persuasive rejection of LGBs by their families (Savin-Williams 2001). Although it is important to acknowledge that rejection is a lived reality for some LGBs, Gorman Murray (2008) suggests that it is not the only story that represents the lives of sexual minorities and he draws attention to parents who accept and support their LGB children without significant difficulty.

The small collection of research which has directly engaged with the experiences of non-heterosexuality and siblings has alluded to a more positive story of disclosure. Research shows that siblings are heavily implicated in the coming out process (Cramer and Roach 1988; Savin-Williams 1998; Strommen 1989; Toomey and Richardson 2009), and they are sometimes the first in the family to be told of a sibling's sexuality (Crosbie-Burnett *et al.*, 1996; Murray 1994). Accounts of sibling disclosure have also touched on the considerable variability of reactions, showing that while brothers may be the most likely to respond in negative and violent ways (D'Augelli *et al.*, 2008), a significant proportion of siblings accept their LGB brothers or sisters (D'Augelli 1991; D'Augelli *et al.*, 1998;

Gorman-Murray 2008). Work by Toomey and Richardson (2009) and Hilton and Szymanski (2011) also looked beyond the process of disclosure, showing how being out enables siblings to build stronger, closer connections. The collection of work focused on the experiences of siblings is useful as it has illustrated how coming out is significant and life altering for sibling relationships, and should be taken into account in the family coming out story (Jenkins 2008). However, this chapter also indicates that because LGB individuals and their heterosexual siblings are rarely studied together we know very little about the ways that they interact with, and relate to one another during and after the coming out process. This, I argue, leaves us with a limited and partial understanding of the sibling coming out experience.

I believe that the question of how disclosure affects the relationship *between* LGB and heterosexual siblings remains largely unanswered. I argue that there is still much scope for exploring the nature of interrelationships between LGB and heterosexual siblings, and more specifically the ways in which brothers and sisters jointly construct the experience of coming out, how sexualities identities are negotiated between siblings, and the positive and negative impact of disclosure on their connections over time. There is value in researching sibling experiences as it will further understandings of how siblings 'do' family life (Morgan 1996; 1999); how sibling relationships function or are managed within the boundaries of heterosexual families and, how new sibling identities and behaviours are accomplished or restricted.

In the following chapter, I detail my methodological rationale for incorporating a qualitative mixed methods approach for generating a rich and nuanced understanding of the coming out experience for siblings, and the ways in which disclosure can impact upon sibling practices, identities and relationships.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Research as Rollercoaster**

I was seven years old when I experienced my first rollercoaster ride. It was called Thunder Mountain and it was one of the main attractions at Disneyland Paris. I remember queueing up and feeling a surge of butterflies in my tummy. I was nervous, scared, and excited all at the same time. When our turn finally came, I climbed aboard the train and sat next to my dad. After a few safety checks, we were off. The rollercoaster climbed a slow and gradual incline to one of the ride's first hills. At the top, I could see a view of the park and it was breathtaking. Before I knew it, the track took a sudden drop and the train carriage started to pick up speed. It was going faster and faster. I could feel my heart beating louder in my chest and my stomach start to turn over. The adrenaline was surging through my body. Chilling sounds flooded my senses; the howl of wild dogs, the creaking of the track, the explosion of dynamite. The carriage kept twisting and turning, making sudden drops and plunging into darkness and then light. I was scared, but exhilarated, not knowing what was coming next or when the ride was going to be over. When the train eventually came to a stop relief washed over me. I had done it. I had survived my first rollercoaster ride, and it was like nothing I had ever experienced before; both wonderful and terrifying at the same time.

#### **Introduction**

In this methods chapter, I suggest that the rollercoaster can provide a useful metaphor for making sense of what Jamieson *et al* (2011) call the 'messy realities' of doing qualitative research with, and in, families (p. 1). I propose that the actualities of researching intimate and personal relationships can elicit a complex fusion of ups, downs, and twists and turns that are similar to that of a rollercoaster ride. The 'ups' relate to the things that were successful and enjoyable in the context of the research, the 'downs' symbolise parts of the research design and process that were unsuccessful or difficult, and the 'twists and turns' illustrate the unexpected experiences that arose from working in the field. Noting that qualitative research can be an embodied experience and that 'researchers may be emotionally affected by the work they do' (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2009 p. 61), I also suggest that research can evoke similar emotions to those I experienced on my first rollercoaster: fear, surprise, uncertainty, relief and joy. This chapter presents a procedural account of how I planned, designed and implemented this research



project. It also includes a reflexive engagement with some of the successes and failures, surprises and challenges, and what Guillemin and Gillam (2004) term 'ethically important moments', understood as 'the difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research' (p. 262). I propose that framing this methodological chapter around the concept of research as rollercoaster is important, as it offers a glimpse into some of the wonders and complexities of doing research with siblings.

As indicated in the thesis introduction, this research sought to capture a better understanding of the experience of coming out to siblings, from the perspective of LGB individuals and their heterosexual brothers and sisters. In order to address this aim, the project was guided by a main research question: how do LGBs and their heterosexual siblings experience the coming out process in families, and how does this change their sibling relationships over time? A number of sub questions were also addressed:

1. In what ways is the coming out process managed and strategized between LGB and heterosexual siblings?
2. How is disclosure initially experienced between LGB and heterosexual siblings?
3. In what ways does disclosure impact upon, change, and evolve the structure of relationships, identities and everyday practices between LGB and heterosexual siblings over time?

In order to gain a picture of sibling coming out experiences and the effects they can have upon the sibling connection, I propose that it is important to implement a qualitative mixed methods (QMM) research design, which included the use of semi-structured interviews, sibling sticker charts solicited diaries, and debrief meetings. Gabb (2009) suggests that the integration of different qualitative methods produces dynamic and 'multidimensional material on *where*, *when* and *how* family relationships are experienced and *why* interactions take on particular forms, values and understandings' (p. 37). Such an approach offers a rich analytical picture of the ways that LGB and heterosexual siblings relate to one another, before, during and after coming out, giving us new insight into how these identities are negotiated, managed, regulated, and performed in everyday family life. This QMM approach is explored in more detail in section one.

This chapter is divided into four main parts. In the first section, I discuss the broad epistemological, ontological and methodological framings of this research, meaning that I am clear about the way that I construct reality, my perception of knowledge, and the ways of knowing in this research (Denzin and Lincoln 1998). In the following section, I introduce the participants who feature in the substantive chapters. Here I consider some of the ups and downs, twists and turns of accessing a sample of LGB and heterosexual siblings, addressing issues of advertising, recruitment and bias. The third section details the four methods of data collection, how I designed each of these methods, and my justifications for using these as a way of engaging with subjective sibling stories. I interweave the rollercoaster metaphor throughout, taking account of some of the successes and failures of the research, as well as some of the unexpected experiences of working in the field. Although ethical issues are addressed throughout this chapter, I explicitly engage with ethical considerations that arose by adopting a QMM approach, in section three. Section four details how the data was managed, analysed and later disseminated to participants.

## **Section One: Framing**

In this section, I address the three essential aspects of a research paradigm; the ontological nature of reality, the epistemological relationship to knowledge, and the methods deployed in this research (Denzin and Lincoln 1998).

### *Knowing and Being: The e-word and the o-word<sup>8</sup>*

Mason (2002) indicates that a central element of a research design involves a clear understanding of the 'essence' of a researcher's enquiry (p. 13). This, she argues, includes making visible the researcher's understanding of the nature of the social world (i.e. ontological positioning) and what they regard as knowledge or evidence of social 'reality' (i.e. epistemological position) (Mason 2002). Boden *et al* (2005) indicate that being explicit about these theoretical frameworks enables 'readers to understand where you are coming from and to make a judgement on the quality of your work based on that understanding' (p. 42). In order to explore the interconnected experiences of siblings, I draw upon an interpretivist perspective, along with influences from feminist traditions and social constructionism.

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<sup>8</sup> I borrow part of this title (the e-word and o-word) from Boden *et al's* (2005) *Getting started on research*, which I found particularly useful at the start of my studies, for helping me to understand the importance of locating my theoretical framework

Interpretivists construct reality as relative and multiple, and accept that there is more than a single way of accessing these realities. An interpretivist approach, then, represents a marked departure from the classic scientific view of positivism with its emphasis upon truth and rationality. Within a positivist tradition, reality is perceived to be singular, external, and objective, and scientific knowledge or truth about the world is understood to be discoverable by a rational observer (Bryman 2012). Scholars working within this tradition seek science that is value free, emotionally neutral, and objective and they attempt to remain detached and distant from the subjects of their research, creating an important distinction between reason and feelings, and science and personal experience (Bryman 2012; Carson *et al.*, 2001). In contrast, Blaikie (2007) indicates that interpretivists see social reality as the product of its human inhabitants, whose world is 'interpreted by the meanings that participants produce and reproduce as a necessary part of their everyday activities together' (p. 131). This approach recognises the differences between people and aims to produce knowledge by understanding and interpreting the subjective meanings that people construct about their social world (Bryman 2012). As Blaikie (2000) explains:

Interpretivists are concerned with understanding the social world people have produced and which they reproduce through their continuing activities. This everyday reality consists of the meanings and interpretations given by the social actors to their actions, other people's actions, social situations, and natural and humanly created objects. In short, in order to negotiate their way around their world and make sense of it, social actors have to interpret their activities together, and it is these meanings, embedded in language, that constitute their social reality (p. 115).

Interpretivism is a perspective that sits comfortably within a constructionist epistemology, which suggests that truth is not objective as argued by positivists, but rather exists through the social processes and interactions (which can vary across time and culture) in which people are engaged (Burr 2003). Constructionists propose that meaning is constructed through interaction and they are interested in exploring the different construction of meanings that participants relate to a particular social phenomenon. Adopting such an approach enables researchers to engage with multiple realities, accounting for the different meanings, motives and reasons that people assign to their subjective experiences in specific times and contexts (Thompson and Woodward 2004). In contrast to traditional

scientific work, which seeks to render the researcher invisible, interpretivists recognise that researchers and participants are mutually interactive in the research process and produce a collaborative account of reality during the data collection stage. As such, they stress that it is important to foreground the position of researchers in the construction of knowledge. In recognising that there is not a single version of reality, an interpretivist epistemology is appropriate for my study, which seeks to interpret and bring to light the meanings and experiences that siblings assign to the coming out process.

The research design and process was also influenced by elements of feminist epistemology and methodology. Despite the diversity between the different strands, academic feminists as a collective have criticised the dominance of traditional western epistemology, with its belief that knowledge claims are universal and absolute. Feminists argue that such an approach denies the socially, culturally and historically situated nature of knowledge (Harding 1993) and reflects a longstanding tradition of male bias within the sciences (see Oakley 1974; Stanley and Wise 1993). Feminists have argued that the presentation of 'hygienic' (Kelly *et al.*, 1994 p. 46) research is not plausible as researchers cannot separate themselves from the world they inhabit (Letherby 2003). Feminists therefore advocate an approach which draws out the experiences of those traditionally hidden from research in a way which celebrates reflexivity, emotion, care and openness, taking into account the 'detail of doing research and the relationship between this and the knowledge produced' (Letherby 2003 p.6).

The work of these feminist researchers preceded much of the later work in many of the major disciplines of sociology, influencing how qualitative research is now framed around values of meaning, interaction, emotion and subjectivity. These feminist researchers also contributed significantly towards a shift in the sociology of the family, reinforcing the idea that we should be talking about families, not 'the family'. Challenging the supposed natural order of 'the family', feminists brought the salience of inequality and the subordination between men and women, and children and adults to the forefront of family studies. Scholarship on the oppression of women within the family (Barret and McIntosh 1982; Foreman and Dallos 1992; Gittins 1993; Yllo 2005), the social construction of women's position as 'natural' carers and homemakers (Thorne 1992), the critique of nuclear family imagery or 'the families we live by' (Gillis 1997 p. xv) for obscuring the diversity in families and households, and children's own perspectives of relational family living (Morrow 1998; Mayall 2002) are just some examples of how feminists have pushed the conceptual boundaries of family studies. Feminist influences are important for my work then, not just in recognising the shift in understandings of family, but in the creation of new and more diverse ways of researching family life as a relational process, an interaction, as something

that is 'done' (Morgan 1996). Gabb (2008) proposes that the conceptual shift in understandings of family through everyday practices 'led researchers to search for more dynamic approaches which reflect how these everyday processes of care and affect are materialised' (p. 18). Gabb (2008) suggests that the combination of data from a qualitative mixed methods approach, which is research that draws upon a variety of different qualitative methods (e.g. interviews, diary methods, drawing techniques, observations, photo elicitation) has become a popular way of producing 'a multilayered account of the times, places and forms of different interactions' (p. 18). This qualitative mixed methods approach that was adopted for my research is explored in more detail below.

### *Qualitative Mixed Methods*

My epistemological and ontological framing suggested that a qualitative approach was the most appropriate design for my study. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) define qualitative research as a 'situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations' (p. 3). Qualitative researchers, then, do not perceive reality as 'fixed, single, agreed upon or measurable', as argued by positivists; instead they strive towards understanding social phenomena and the meanings that people have (re)construed about their lives (Merriam 2002 p. 1). Mason (2002) suggests that a qualitative approach offers the scope to:

...explore a wide array of dimensions of the social world, including the texture and weave of everyday life, the understandings, experiences and imaginings of our research participants, the ways that social processes, institutions, discourses or relationships work, and the significance of the meanings that they generate (p. 1).

Qualitative researchers draw upon a number of interpretative practices like interviews, observations, and focus groups in order to gain a better understanding of the social phenomena they are exploring. As indicated previously the combination of different and often participatory qualitative methods have become popular in sociological studies of family life and childhood. Edwards *et al.*'s (2006) use of circle maps, alongside interviews to chart levels of emotional closeness to the people who were significant in children's lives, Mauthner's (1997) discussion of the use of 'draw and write' activities in The Healthy Eating Project (see also Mauthner *et al.*, 1993; Turner *et al.*, 1995), and the mobile (i.e. 'guided' walks and car journey interactions) and participatory methods used in the (Extra)ordinary Lives project, to

explore the everyday lives, identities and relationships of children and young people in care (see Ross *et al.*, 2009; 2011), are illustrative of the range of creative methods that have been developed to understand interactions and practices of care among children, and also families. There has also been a rise in QMM approaches to the sociological study of family life. For example, Jacqui Gabb, in *Behind Closed Doors*, drew upon a combination of interviews, diaries, emotion maps, observations, vignettes, photographs and focus groups to explore how intimacy and sexuality was experienced in different settings around the home (Gabb 2008; 2009; 2013).

In this research, I encompassed a QMM research design as I felt it would create a dynamic and multilayered picture of the relational connections between LGB and heterosexuality siblings. The value of introducing QMM into studies of sibling life lies in the distinctive data that each of the different methods generates, and how the synergy of these methods weave together to produce a textured picture of everyday practices in families (Gabb 2008). Gabb (2013) argues that QMMs are particularly useful for 'drilling down through the multidimensional layers of practices, meanings, biography, and emotional attachments, to reveal the fabric of family processes [and] to gain insight into the decision making processes which inform family relationships and ordinary practices of sexuality and intimacy' (p. 326). I chose to combine interviews, sibling sticker charts, solicited diaries, and debrief meetings in order to piece together a more nuanced picture of the processes through which non-heterosexuality was regulated, negotiated and expressed in sibling relationships and wider family networks, and to identify the complex emotions involved in these experiences. I suggest that a QMM approach nudges forward our understandings of how LGB and heterosexual siblings relate to one another before, during, and after the coming out process and how this impacts upon and complicates their everyday practices of intimacy in the family.

### *Thinking through Reflexivity*

One special, almost unique, feature of the study of family and relationships is the close and necessary overlap in terms of understanding and experiences between researcher and researched (Morgan 2011b p. 29)

As Morgan suggests here, when doing family research it is important to pay careful attention to reflexivity in the research process, as researchers are inevitably linked to their subject matter. Jamieson *et al* (2011) suggests that there has been a tendency to 'clean up' written research and accounts about

the process of research through a fear of being discredited, losing an important picture of what it is really like to do qualitative research with and in families. Framing my research through influences from feminist traditions allowed me to recognise that the knowledge produced throughout this research, was socially constructed, partial, situated and influenced by my own subjectivity. Reflexivity then was an important part of the research design and process. Reflexivity has become increasingly recognised as an important research strategy for assessing the quality of knowledge generated through qualitative inquiry (Finlay 2002). Indeed, as Flood (1999) argues, 'without some degree of reflexivity any research is blind and without purpose' (p. 35). Reflexivity is a relatively complex term, with multiple meanings. Berger (2013) suggests that it refers to:

The process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome (p. 2).

Berger (2013) indicates that notions of reflexivity are embedded in broader debates about the 'ontological, epistemological and axiological components of the self, intersubjectivity and the colonization of knowledge', and the importance of understanding the role of researchers and the impact of their 'biases, beliefs, and personal experiences on their research' (p. 2). Incorporating processes of reflexivity into the complete research process 'from the beginning to the end' is said to open up the research and offer a more nuanced insight into the complex issues under investigation (Sultana 2007 p. 376), as well as bringing methodological and ethical challenges to light (England 1994). Although, I do acknowledge cautions against 'navel-grazing', self-indulgence, or simple acts of confession (Atkinson 1997; Coffey 1999; Skeggs 2004; Sultana 2007), it was important to locate the multiple positions that I brought to this research. One way of doing this was to acknowledge constructed identity positions, which as Coffey (1999) suggests, means writing signifiers of the self into the text, in ways that may account for my interpretation of the participants' accounts. Although a multiple standpoint perspective has also been substantively critiqued, it has been useful for me to articulate and reflect on how my experiences as a lesbian, a sibling and, a daughter from a family that has constructed itself as white, British and middle class have affected the way that I designed the research, interacted with the participants, generated data, and performed the analysis.

One of the strategies that I adopted for facilitating a reflexive approach was to keep a research journal throughout the research process. Although I initially approached this task with some apprehension, my

journals soon became my most treasured research tools. I carried them with me everywhere, personalised them with pictures, and wrote in them consistently; sometimes once or twice a week, but often a couple of times a day (see figure 3.1). My journals offered an invaluable platform for documenting a detailed and situated history of the choices I made about the research process, as and when they unfolded. This included mapping research ideas, outcomes of supervisions, advertising locations, participant contact, interview dates and localities. They also enabled me to document and work out successful and complex fieldwork experiences, and ethical questions that arose from the research. I was also able to express my emotions, vent my frustrations and disappointments, document my successes, and articulate my insecurities. My journals presented a snapshot of research as a rollercoaster, and all of the ups, downs, twists and turns that I experienced in doing qualitative research with siblings.



Figure. 3.1 Research Journals

As already noted in the introduction, my original interest in this research topic arose out of my own subjective experiences of being a lesbian woman who had come out to my siblings. Although levels of commonality (i.e. gender, sexuality, class, culture) varied between the participants, and myself, the shared experience of coming out at home suggests a relatively clear position as researcher as insider. As Kanuha (2000) indicates, insider status refers to a process in which researchers conduct studies with populations of which they are also a member, therefore sharing similar identities, experiences, and language with participants. Positioning myself in this way meant that important considerations had to be given to how I represented myself to the participants, as well as the benefits and drawbacks of researching from the inside.

One of the decisions I had to make concerned the presentation and disclosure of my own sexuality and my positive experience of coming out to my siblings. In order to focus on the stories of participants and



to avoid marginalising those with different experiences (especially the heterosexual siblings), I decided to reveal my sexuality only to those who explicitly asked, despite research that suggests that LGBs are more likely to share their social experiences with someone they can trust and relate to (see, for example, Kong *et al.*, 2002; LaSala 2003). Many participants were surprisingly inquisitive and directly questioned me about my sexuality, my sibling relationships, and my motivations for conducting the research. As demonstrated by one of the heterosexual participants: 'do you have a sibling that's gay?... cos I was interested if you knew it from this perspective or if you were a total outsider coming in like, how did that work' (K. Hepburn), and one of the lesbian participants Monkey; 'do you have brothers and sisters then?' (Monkey). Contrary to popular advice within traditional 'masculine' interview paradigms to avoid engaging with participant questioning; 'if the informant poses a question...parry it' (Sjoberg and Nett, 1968 in Oakley 2004 p. 247), I answered all questions openly and honestly in order to foster an environment of mutual disclosure, and to avoid treating participants as 'objective instruments of data production' (Oakley 1981 p. 58). Other participants made assumptions about me being a lesbian and the insider knowledge I would have, demonstrated by references to iconic British and American television shows (e.g. *The L Word*, *Lip Service*, *Queer as Folk*), political movements (e.g. gay liberation), activist organisations (e.g. Stonewall), and gay and lesbian celebrities.

Within the social sciences, there has been considerable debate concerning some of the advantages or dangers of engaging in insider research. On the one hand, shared membership with the population under study has been argued to give researchers certain advantages that help to facilitate the research process. This has included 'speaking the same insider language, understanding the local values, knowledge and taboos, knowing the formal and informal power structure, and obtaining permission to conduct the research, to interview, and to get access to records, and documents easily' (Unluer 2012 p. 5). It is, then, important to acknowledge that my position as a lesbian researcher, alongside my voluntary role as a LGBT youth worker offered several advantages in the research process. This included having privileged access to LGBT communities, networks, and spaces, alongside existing relationships with organisational gatekeepers and LGB individuals, which assisted in the advertising and recruitment stage. My prior connections also resulted in research participation by four people I already knew, who were friends or colleagues. Blichfeldt and Heldbjerg (2011) suggest that interviewing those with whom you already have a trusting interpersonal relationship can result in several research advantages, including the facilitation of longer-lasting in-depth conversations, participants feeling more relaxed, honest, and open, and the elicitation of different kinds of data. Being invested in the LGB community also meant that I had a good understanding of the culture and the sibling coming out

experience that I was exploring. This was particularly useful in making sense of specific LGB language, acronyms, history, and media references that peppered the participants' accounts.

Scholars have however, also identified some of the difficulties that insider researchers may experience, including role duality, assumptions about prior knowledge, and a loss of 'objectivity' (DeLyser 2001). Methodological and ethical issues with insider research have also been argued to be amplified when interviewing friends and colleagues. Cotterill (1992), for example, suggests that researchers are faced with the difficulty of moving from informal to formal talk, friends revealing more than they planned to, awkward connections during and after the research, and the blurring of researcher/friend boundaries in terms of the participants expecting reciprocal disclosure (expected as part of a close relationship) about the issue under inquiry. Concerns have also been raised about assumptions from researchers and participants in relation to common understandings about experiences, missing the hidden and nuanced accounts of social life. Mannay (2010), for example, gives a particularly salient illustration of how she managed her insider status as a working-class white woman researching the everyday experiences of working-class mothers and daughters in a spatial area in which she was living with her own children, by incorporating the use of creative self-directed visual techniques.

Being attentive to insider concerns, I approached the fieldwork with sensitivity, paying careful attention to confidentiality, on-going consent and working with the participants and their data (as explored in section three). A QMM approach with the use of creative participatory visual methods was also an important strategy for 'making the familiar strange' and avoiding assumptions and common understandings in research with friends (Mannay 2010 p. 91).

Being an insider often meant engaging in what Bondi (2005) calls emotion work. Dickson-Swift *et al* (2009) point to a growing awareness that involvement in qualitative research can be an embodied experience, in that research particularly on sensitive topics, can impact upon all those involved, which includes researchers. Throughout the research process I was faced with a number of situations that evoked different emotions. I was touched by tales of love and support by siblings, and amused by stories of play and mischief. I felt empathy and compassion towards participants' accounts of fear at the prospect of coming out, but frustrated with my choice not to challenge views that I found personally hurtful, such as one participant's assertion that LGBs should not have children. I was also anxious, confused, and uncomfortable when I was told of early sexual experiences, and I struggled to hold back my tears when participants recounted stories of self-harm, abuse and loss. Like some of my participants, during the process of research I also moved back home and was faced with my own

decisions about how to express and perform my sexuality within family dynamics. This experience of moving back home, gave me new insight and new ideas about how the participants felt and managed their performances of sexuality at home. The complex and ever present emotion work of researching was something that I reflected upon in my research journals.

Right now I feel over the moon. I have a smile that is stretching across my whole face and I am doing a little happy dance at my desk. I have just received an email from someone who saw my poster in a community space and wants to get involved in my research. All that effort to advertise finally feels like it was worth it (Journal Entry: Feb 2011)

During our interview [one of the female participants] made a comment about how her girlfriend is a bit jealous and she jokingly says 'oh so you are meeting up with Sarah again are you???' Something about this made me feel really uncomfortable. It made me aware of my own sexuality and how it was present, if not spoken about in the context of research. I was worried that her participation would cause problems or arguments in her relationship (Journal Entry: September 2011)

I met [one of the heterosexual participants] for the first time today and when she turned up she grabbed me, gave me a massive hug and planted a big kiss on my cheek. I was a bit taken back. I didn't know what I was expecting, but she just treated me like I was a dear old friend. It was rather lovely and she was a pleasure to listen and talk to (Journal Entry: October 2011)

These short snippets illustrate my research as rollercoaster journey and the range of issues and positive and negative emotions that were elicited along the way. At times these were experiences that left me feeling emotionally and physically exhausted, overwhelmed and anxious, much like those described by Dickson-Swift *et al* (2009), in the process of research. Yet at other times these experiences elated me and made me feel confident and positive about the work I was doing. As this kind of emotion work has been argued to have consequences and implications for the wellbeing of researchers (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2009) it was important to look after myself during the process of research. Reflecting in my research journal, discussing issues and concerns with supervisors, and

planning enjoyable things outside of work was essential in managing the emotions of carrying out qualitative research with siblings.

## Section Two: Participants

### *Sample*

I used a non-probability, purposive approach to sampling as it is generally considered to be the most effective for in-depth, small samples (Patton, 2002). Through engaging with a specific target population, purposeful sampling offers the researcher meaningful insight into a specific phenomenon, from a shared perspective (Gilbert 2008). Three criteria governed the selection of my research sample. First, I sought participants who were over the age of 16. This decision was made partly due to the difficulties of having to gain parental consent for anyone under the age of 16 to take part in research, meaning that it would only be possible to recruit LGB individuals who had already come out to their parents, and who were comfortable addressing issues of sexuality with them. In addition, the majority of existing sociological research on siblings has focused on the experiences of children (e.g. Edwards *et al.*, 2006; McIntosh and Punch 2009) and little research has accounted for the nature of adult sibling relationships over time. Secondly, I sought to recruit participants who were living in South East Wales or West England<sup>9</sup>, although this was relatively flexible. Finally, I was interested in recruiting those who defined themselves as either LGB and had heterosexual or LGB siblings, or were heterosexual and had LGB brothers or sisters. As mentioned in chapter one, I adopted a relatively flexible definition of siblings, and was interested in talking to people with sibling connections by blood, marriage, and/or adoption.

The sample for this research consisted of a total of 25 individuals. The participants ranged in age from 16 to 75. They all defined themselves as white, with the exception of one who was from a mixed-white<sup>10</sup> heritage. The participants resided in geographically diverse locations across England and Wales<sup>11</sup> and were originally from varied nationalities<sup>12</sup>. Most of the participants self-defined their sexuality as either lesbian (n=9), gay (n=7), or heterosexual (n=6) excluding one female participant who defined herself as bisexual and another as having a fluid/dynamic sexuality. All but one of the LGB participants had come

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<sup>9</sup> These locations were chosen due to financial reasons relating to travel costs and time

<sup>10</sup> For this participant, a mixed white heritage meant that one parent was white, and the other was not. To protect participant anonymity, it is not possible to identify the ethnicity of the other parent.

<sup>11</sup> Although I originally sought participants from South East Wales or West England, I ended up interviewing people from a wider geographic pool

<sup>12</sup> This included being born or raised in some European and other western countries, but having lived in the UK for a significant period of time

out to their brothers or sisters, and many were also out to their parents and other family members. Table 3.1, below, shows the participant demographics in more detail.

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sexuality</b>	<b>Out to Siblings</b>
<b>Andy</b>	Male	16-25	Gay	No
<b>Angel-Paul</b>	Male	26-35	Gay	Yes
<b>Angie</b>	Female	26-35	Lesbian	Yes
<b>K. Hepburn</b>	Female	16-25	Heterosexual	
<b>Charlotte</b>	Female	16-25	Heterosexual	
<b>Dragon</b>	Male	26-35	Gay	Yes
<b>Ellen</b>	Female	26-35	Lesbian	Yes
<b>Filius Banana Hammock</b>	Male	16-25	Gay	Yes
<b>Fred</b>	Male	56-65	Heterosexual	
<b>Georgina</b>	Female	26-35	Lesbian	Yes
<b>Tara</b>	Female	16-25	Lesbian	Yes
<b>Emil</b>	Male	56-65	Heterosexual	
<b>Heather</b>	Female	16-25	Heterosexual	
<b>Louis</b>	Male	16-25	Gay	Yes
<b>Jason</b>	Male	16-25	Gay	Yes
<b>Miss G</b>	Female	26-35	Lesbian	Yes
<b>Molly</b>	Female	26-35	Lesbian	Yes
<b>Monkey</b>	Female	26-35	Lesbian	Yes
<b>Anne</b>	Female	36-45	Heterosexual	
<b>Patricia</b>	Female	36-35	Fluid/dynamic	Yes
<b>Rebecca</b>	Female	66-75	Lesbian	Yes
<b>Simon</b>	Male	16-24	Gay	Not to sister
<b>Sue</b>	Female	66-75	Lesbian	Yes
<b>Holly</b>	Female	36-45	Lesbian	Yes

**Table 3.1 Participant Demographics**

As there has been an absence of research that has explored the stories of LGB and heterosexual siblings together, one of the unique and defining characteristics of my research was to examine the experiences of LGB and heterosexual siblings from the same families. It was my hope that doing so would offer a more complete and nuanced understanding of the coming out process and the way it impacts upon and changes relational sibling connections and practices, as well as a wider snapshot of the way sexuality functions in families. Although it was not possible to access a sample of LGB and heterosexual siblings who were all connected (for reasons discussed later in this chapter), nine of the participants were related and came from five different families. These sibling connections are visually represented in figure 3.2 below. As discussed later in this chapter, due to the complexities of participant anonymity when working with family members who are related, the sibling connections were additionally anonymised, with individual and family pseudonyms that I chose.

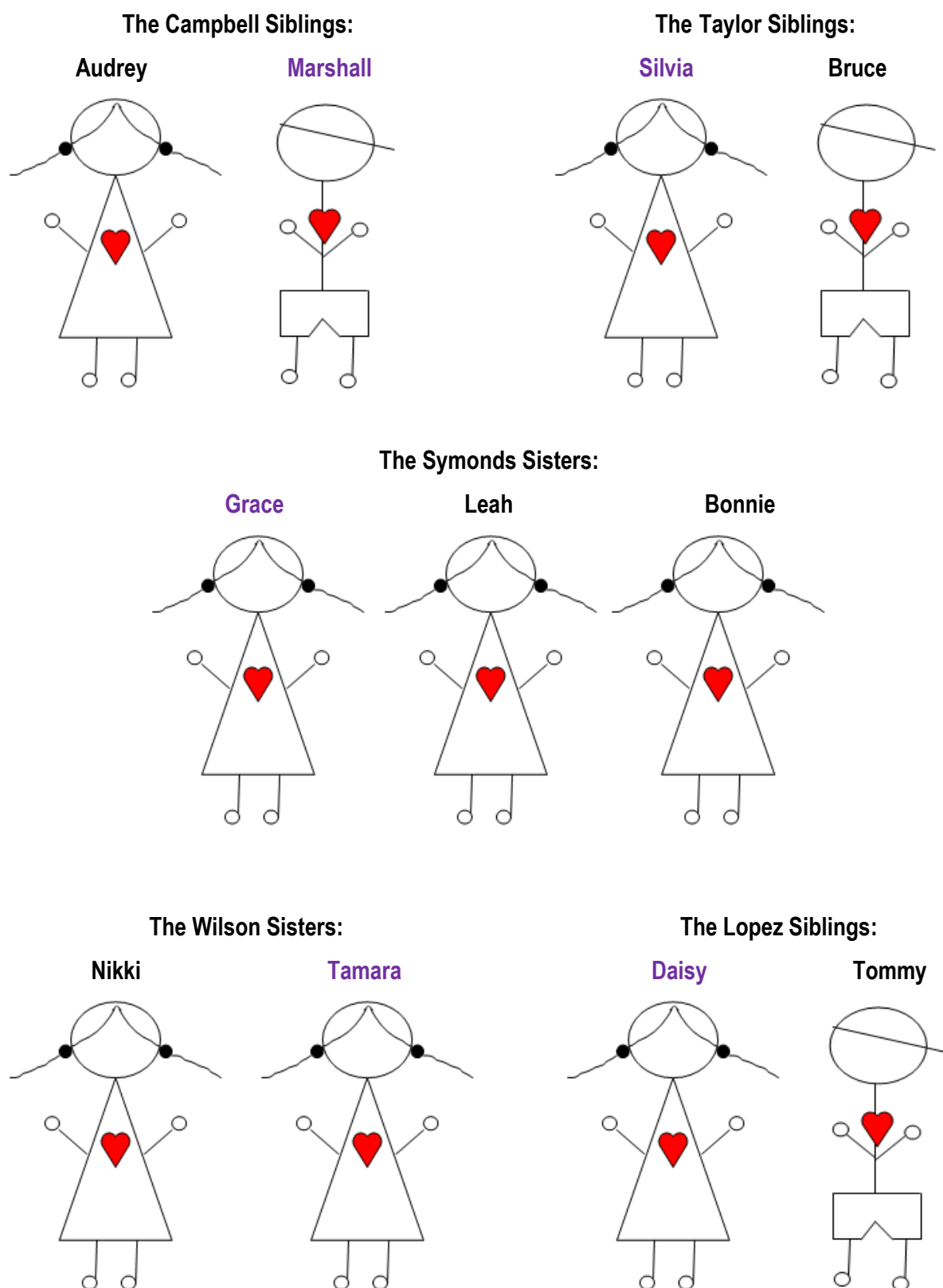


Figure 3.2. Sibling Connections



## *Access and Recruitment*

Accessing representative samples from LGBT communities for participation in research has been identified as a significant challenge for researchers. Non-heterosexuals are considered to be part of a hard-to-reach population, as many choose to conceal their identity (Duncan *et al.*, 2003), and are often unevenly out across private and public spaces (Valentine 1993). Research also suggests that the way in which individuals define their sexual identities, and whether a person uses an LGB identity label can vary across different generations, ethnicities, geographic regions and educational levels (Meyer and Wilson 2009). A number of innovative non-probability sampling techniques have been developed in LGB studies to tackle some of these challenges, such as accessing people via LGB community venues and snowball sampling<sup>13</sup> (Meyer and Wilson 2009). Sampling in LGB community spaces has a long and valued history; indeed it is one of the most frequently used methods of convenience sampling<sup>14</sup> for accessing LGBs who would be difficult to locate through other means (Rothblum 2007). However, there is a widely established critique of this method, namely that it only accesses LGBs who participate in these communities and whose sexuality is most visible (Elze 2003; 2009). There is also an argument that individuals who participate in LGB community groups are different from those that do not, and that results based upon community group sampling are therefore biased (Meyer and Wilson 2009). Snowball techniques that have also been a favoured technique for recruiting LGBs, have also been criticised for being biased towards the inclusion of individuals who had existing interrelationships (Faugier and Sargeant 1997). Similar difficulties have also been raised in terms of accessing the family members of LGBT people for purposes of research. There is a noted critique within the coming out literature of research which only presents, individual rather than whole family accounts of the experiences of disclosure (Baptist and Allen 2008; Savin-Williams and Dube 1998; Valentine *et al.*, 2003). When the stories of parents and LGB children are studied together, Savin-Williams and Dube (1998) suggest that it is rarely the parents of the LGBs being studied, offering little insight into the family experience of coming out. Furthermore, Savin-Williams and Dube (1998) indicate that the parents of LGB children are often recruited via existing parental support groups, meaning that they may have similar stories or experiences.

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<sup>13</sup> Snowball sampling is a technique that makes use of the contacts that research participants have, meaning that participants are asked to suggest other potential participants for involvement in research. It is a popular technique for accessing hard to reach populations (see Tranter 2013)

<sup>14</sup> Convenience sampling is a type of non-probability sampling, which involves the selection of the most accessible and available participants to the researcher, i.e. those who are easy to locate (see Bryman 2004).

In an attempt to acknowledge and move beyond the sampling critiques of existing research, I spent a long time designing and implementing a creative advertising and recruitment strategy, though which I sought to access a range of diverse individuals. I designed two colourful A5 research posters<sup>15</sup> (figures 3.3 and 3.4) and a call for participant's sheet (see Appendix 1) to target LGB and heterosexual individuals, and give them some information about who I was, what my study was about, and its purpose.



Figure. 3.3 & 3.4 Research Posters

A great deal of time and effort was invested in displaying these posters and calls for research in various community spaces in four different cities throughout England and Wales. In my first phase of recruitment I advertised my research in spaces that were not specifically LGBT community spaces, including universities (student unions, libraries, and department notice boards), coffee shops, community notice boards, art houses, libraries, festivals, youth clubs, Gumtree, conferences, and shops (see figure 3.5). Accessing these spaces was however more challenging than expected. There was a lack of physical space to post adverts, and the spaces that were available were often heavily guarded by complex bureaucratic procedures<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> The posters were written in English, but also translated into Welsh for ease of recruitment in Wales

<sup>16</sup> This type of bureaucracy was most evident when I had to attend 4 separate meetings with different public relations officers before I was permitted to display one research poster in a university student union



**Figure. 3.5 Research Advertising**

Advertising in non-specific LGBT spaces was somewhat successful and I was contacted by five individuals who were interesting in taking part in my research. However, five participants were not sufficient for my study, particularly as I was interested in studying LGB and heterosexual siblings together. I therefore implemented a second phase of recruitment, which included advertising in LGBT spaces and communities; such as LGBT Facebook groups<sup>17</sup>, LGBT conferences, LGBT university societies and staff networks, gay bars and clubs, human rights organisations, and gay pride festivals. I also drew upon my community connections to identify friends and colleagues who held key positions in LGBT organisations/networks, to ask them to distribute my call for participants. To assist in recruiting more people, especially heterosexual siblings I used a snowball sampling technique by asking each of my participants to pass on my research flyer to anyone they thought might be interested in getting involved (Faugier and Sargeant 1997). The second phase of recruitment yielded an additional 20 participants resulting in a sample of 25 individuals, as noted above. The final 25 participants indicated that they had heard about my research from snowballing techniques (n=9), community or university notice boards (n=5), organisational networks (n=4), youth clubs (n=1), conferences (n=1), and gay pride festivals (n=1). Four participants were already known to me as friends or colleagues. All of the heterosexual siblings (n=6) were recruited via their LGB siblings who had already taken part in the research. One of the strengths of this recruitment strategy was that I was able to access a number of participants who were diverse in age, had not been involved in any LGBT community groups or organisations, and were not members of the same friendship groups. However, despite my best efforts to address some of the methodological pitfalls of accessing LGBs for research, it is important to emphasise that my sample group was relatively small and consisted of mostly university educated, white British men and women who defined themselves as either lesbian, gay, or heterosexual.

<sup>17</sup> I was able to post up calls for participants in LGBT groups, using my pre-existing Facebook profile. Although I chose to use my personal account I ensured that I had a suitable profile picture (my sister and me) and had strict privacy settings where only my name, educational achievements, and research interests could be visible to 'non-friends'. I indicated that anyone interested should contact me using my university email address and not through Facebook

### **Section Three: Data Collection**

This section details the methods through which the data was collected, over the period of one year, from January 2011 to January 2012. I describe the four methods of data collection; semi-structured interviews, sibling sticker charts, solicited diaries and debrief meetings, while justifying how and why these methods were used. Drawing upon the research as rollercoaster framework, I also critically consider some of the ups, downs, twists and turns of implementing these methods with siblings. This section ends with a discussion about the ethical considerations that drove this research. Before outlining my QMM approach, it is useful to map which methods the participants choose to participate in, giving a better understanding of the range and depth of data collected (see table 3.2).

Participant	Interview	Sibling Sticker Chart	Diary	Debrief Meeting
Andy	✓	✓ (n =2)	✓	✓
Angel-Paul	✓	✓ (n=1)	✓	✓
Angie	✓	✓ (n=1)	✓	✓
Anne	✓	✓ (n=1)	✓	✓
Charlotte	✓	✓ (n=1)	✗	✗
Dragon	✓	✓(n=1)	✗	✓
Ellen	✓	✓(n=1)	✓	✓
Emil	✓	✓(n=1)	✓	✓
Fred	✓	✗	✗	✗
Filius	✓	✓ (n=1)	✓	✓
Heather	✓	✓ (n=1)	✓	✓
Georgina	✓	✓ (n=3)	✓	✓
Holly	✓	✓ (n=1)	✓	✓
Jason	✓	✓ (n=1)	✗	✓
K. Hepburn	✓	✓(n=1)	✓	✓
Louis	✓	✓(n=3)	✓	✓
Miss G	✓	✗	✓	✓
Molly	✓	✓(n=2)	✓	✓
Monkey	✓	✓ (n=2)	✓	✓
Patricia	✓	✗	✗	✗
Rebecca	✓	✓(n=5)	✓	✓
Simon	✓	✓ (n=2)	✓	✓
Sue	✓	✓ (n=8)	✓	✓
Tara	✓	✓ (n=2)	✗	✗

Table 3.2 Participant Methods

## *Designing and Doing Sibling Interviews*

I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them (Spradley 1979 p. 34).

I chose qualitative interviewing as the most appropriate method for eliciting data on the experience of coming out to siblings (or having a sibling come out), as this approach 'attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world' through conversation and interaction (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009 p. 1). The research interview is depicted as a professional conversation with the purpose of producing knowledge about a particular phenomenon (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009), bringing to light richness, nuance and complexity in personal experience and meaning (Mason 2002). Interviewing is understood to be an active process where knowledge and meaning, is at least to some degree, constructed and co-produced in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). As Seidman (1998) explains, 'interviewers are a part of the interview picture. They ask questions, respond to participant, and at times even share their own experiences. Moreover, interviewers work with the material, select from it, interpret, describe and analyse it' (p.16). It is important to recognise that knowledge produced through interviewing is socially constructed, partial, situated, contextual, and influenced by my own personal subjectivity, as discussed in Section One.

There are multiple typologies for interviewing qualitatively, with each generating different types of data and creating different forms of knowledge, dependent upon the aim and the epistemological foundations of the research. Given that I was interested in gaining a better understanding of the meanings that LGB and heterosexual siblings assign to the experience of coming out, I adopted an in-depth, semi-structured approach to interviewing. Prior to starting fieldwork, I developed an interview guide centred on a number of general topics and contained some open-ended questions that I was interested in exploring (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006). I planned to begin each interview by posing an open question, asking the participants to tell me a little bit about their siblings. The purpose of this was to invite the participants to tell me the story of their sibling relationships, while intending to put them at ease. The remainder of the interview was designed chronologically, starting with questions about early family life and childhood sibling relationships, before moving onto the experiences of coming out,

the changes that have occurred to sibling relationships, and ending with a discussion of relationships in the present and hopes and dreams for the future of their sibling connection. Interview topics included experience questions (e.g. how did you come out to your sister?), opinion and value questions (e.g. what would you like to happen in the future?), feeling questions (e.g. how did you feel in that moment?), and background/demographic questions (e.g. can you tell me a little about yourself) (Patton 2002). In pre-designing the interviews in this way I was attempting to address similar topics with each of the participants, for ease of analysis. However, as noted by Mason (2002) one of the advantages of adopting a semi-structured approach was that there was enough freedom and flexibility to build in spontaneous 'conversations' and to explore unexpected or interesting areas of inquiry, which was significant and meaningful to the participants. The interview guide was also iterative, meaning that questions and topics were changed and added to during fieldwork, as I reflected upon their effectiveness and discovered new literature and themes (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006).

One of the key methodological decisions I had to make was whether or not to interview LGB and heterosexual sibling groups together or separately, if the participants were from the same family. Fontana and Prokos (2007) indicate that the strength of group interviewing, that is the questioning of two or more individuals, lies in the ability to 'produce rich data that [is] cumulative and elaborative' (p. 34). In her work with young siblings, Punch (2007) indicates that group interviews foster a less intense and more fun environment for eliciting spontaneous sibling interaction. Punch (2007) also suggests that group interviews enable children to 'negotiate the production of their shared accounts' of knowledge and to create an awareness of what is being said in the interview setting, avoiding ethical issues of confidentiality (p. 222). However, Punch (2007) cautions against some of the practical difficulties of managing interviews with sibling groups. She draws attention to power struggles between younger and older siblings, including tendencies to contradict one another, to argue, to fight, to talk all at once, and to gang up on one another. In acknowledging that interviewing siblings together can be beneficial, but challenging for the researcher (and participants) to manage, both practically and ethically, I decided to let the participants choose whether they would like to be interviewed with their siblings, or separately. Interestingly, each of the five sibling pairs decided to be interviewed separately, which brought with it its own challenges, as discussed later in the section on ethics.

Once I had designed my interview approach, I piloted it with a friend who had come out to her sibling. Seidman (2013) suggests that piloting qualitative interviews is an important process in beginning to understand the 'unexpected twists and turns of the interviewing process and the complexities of the

interviewing relationship' (p. 42). This pilot exercise, alongside a practice interview, where I asked a colleague to interview me using the guide I had designed, enabled me to identify issues relating to the types of topics/questions I posed, and the order in which I was asking them, as well as an understanding of how emotive the interview process could be.

Prior to the interviews each participant was emailed a detailed information sheet and consent form, which outlined the purpose and process of research (see ethics section for more details). Once the participants had had enough time to consider their participation (between 1-3 weeks) interviews were arranged.

In recognising the potentially sensitive nature of my research, and the power relations that can be embedded within interview locations (Elwood and Martin 2000; Herzog 2005), I felt it was important to allow the participants chose an interview space they deemed comfortable, accessible and convenient (Rubin and Rubin 2012). All of the participants' choices were respected and the interviews were held in a range of different settings, including a private study room at Cardiff University (n=9), participant homes (n=6), participant workplaces (n=4), coffee shops (n=4), and bars (n=2). The majority of participants chose to be interviewed at Cardiff University<sup>18</sup>, where I was able to book a small, private, but relatively sterile study room in a central location on campus. A significant number of other participants chose to be interviewed in their own homes. Interestingly, this preference was exclusively requested by women, and often reflected childcare considerations and the gendered division of labour (see Herzog 2005). Hamalainen and Rautio (2013) suggest that the benefit of interviewing in a participant's home is that they are more likely to be relaxed and comfortable in a setting with which they are familiar. They also suggest that the setting offers a unique insight into the lives of participants. When interviewing in homes, I was overwhelmed at the hospitality of my participants who often treated me like a welcome guest and the measures they went to, to accommodate me (and often feeding me up) during the research process. Interviewing participants at home felt more relaxed and engaging, although distractions, interruptions (e.g. phone calls, guests, partners, children), and finding private spaces to interview were challenges that had to be contended with and overcome.

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<sup>18</sup> There was a relatively even split between men and women who chose to be interviewed at Cardiff University and their ages ranged from late teens to early 70s



When interviewing in people's homes, it was important to think about potential sources of danger or harm that could arise to my own personal safety (Sulka 1990). Although I was not conducting research with 'volatile' communities, I was still a (relatively) young woman, entering the homes of people whom I had never met before, in locations I knew very little about. Therefore, it was important to develop strategies to protect myself when working in the field. This included having a colleague who I checked in with when arriving, and again when leaving a participants home<sup>19</sup>, developing an exit strategy for if I felt uneasy or unsafe<sup>20</sup>, keeping a mobile phone on and present at all times, only visiting participant homes during the day, and researching the local area as much as possible before entering the field.

When carrying out the interviews I paid careful attention to what Kvale (1996) refers to as 'framing'. I began by setting the research context and briefing the participants, reminding them that the research was for a PhD thesis which was focused upon sibling relationships and the experiences of coming out. I gave each participant a hard copy of the information sheet that had been previously emailed to reread, and a written consent form to re-read, initial and sign<sup>21</sup>. I sought their verbal (and written) consent for the interview to be taped using a digital voice recorder and reminded them that their data would be stored and transcribed anonymously. I also gave the participants' time to ask any questions they had about their research participation or what was going to happen during the interview. The purpose of briefing the participants was twofold. First, I wanted to be explicit about the range and the purpose of my research, so each participant could make an informed choice about whether or not they wished to participate (Seidman 1998). Second, this time served as a useful way to relax the participant before the interview, especially when this was accompanied by drinks and snacks and more general talk about travel, studies, jobs, weather and so on.

The interviews, which lasted between 50 minutes and 3 hours, were inspired by a feminist methodology. According to Campbell and Wasco (2000), the 'goal of feminist research is to capture women's lived experiences in a respectful manner that legitimises women's voices as sources of

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<sup>19</sup> Before entering the field, I informed my contact of the approximate location of the interview (e.g. London, Bristol, Cardiff). I gave them a sealed envelope containing my participant's name, address and contact number. They were instructed *only* to open this (and thus jeopardising participant confidentiality) if they thought there was a problem and I did not send an exit text, or was failing to answer their calls. Once I arrived at my participant's home, I texted letting my contact know I had arrived and everything was okay. When the interview was over and I had left the participants home, I sent another text letting them know I had left safely and was on my way home. Once the interview was over I collected the envelopes from the person of contact and destroyed the content.

<sup>20</sup> My exit strategy was to say that I had left the digital recorder (or spare batteries) in my car and we were not able to carry out the interview without them. I would then drive away and ring my contact as soon as it was safe to tell them what had happened.

<sup>21</sup> I also signed these forms to illustrate my own commitment to ethical practice

knowledge' (p. 783). In the process of conducting research, feminist researchers therefore seek to embody an ethic of care, in respecting, understanding, and empowering women (Campbell and Wasco 2000). Feminist researchers, such as Oakley (1981)<sup>22</sup> have suggested that the most effective way of discovering meaning in people's lives is to create non-hierarchical relationships, based upon foundations of trust, rapport, and intimacy. To do this, Oakley (1981) advocated mutual interview interactions, where researchers should invest their own identities in their research relationships, through the sharing of knowledge, the expression of opinions, and the answering of questions (Letherby 2003). It is this type of reciprocity that Oakley (1981) suggested invites a closer research-participant relationship, helping to co-construct an intimate and meaningful account of the participant's experiences. I also wanted to validate the emotionality of participant lives, as well as the emotions experienced through research participation. This approach meant paying careful attention to the wording of questions and how I was asking them, often using softer tones of voice for more difficult areas of inquiry. It meant having an awareness of my own body language and that of my participants, recognising moments of unease or distress and discussing these with the participants in the context of the interview. It meant listening attentively to what the participant was saying and how they were saying it, letting them guide the conversation to what they felt was important. Like Oakley (1981) I too occasionally shared personal stories with my participants. Where appropriate or when asked, I relayed tales of my own sibling experiences; of hero-worshipping my older brother, of playing and fighting with my sister. I was however careful to not completely blur the boundaries between myself and the participants, adopting Seidman's (2013) approach of listening more and talking less, to ensure that the focus remained upon the participants.

The interviews were rounded up with several debriefing questions (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). This included asking the participants why they were interested in talking to me, how they felt about what had been discussed, and if they had anything further they would like to add to our conversation. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) suggest that finishing interviews in this way is good practice for easing participant anxiety, tension, or emotion, as it provides an opportunity to discuss any additional issues, thoughts and feelings that had not already been covered in the main interview. These final questions proved to be very fruitful and elicited some interesting additional discussions about motivations for participation, including subjective and altruistic interests (see Clark 2010; Peel *et al.*, 2006), as well as further dialogue concerning the implications of gender in siblings relationships, coming out, and suffering from

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<sup>22</sup> Here I talk about Oakley in past tense to illustrate how she has moved far from this position and now advocates randomised control trials as the best method for eliciting meaning in people's lives. See for example, Oakley (2000).

mental health issues. At the end of the interview I asked the participants if they had any questions about their involvement, what had been discussed or what would happen next in relation to the diary task and debrief meeting. In an attempt to pre-empt any potential distress, before the participants left the interview I gave them a support pack, which contained leaflets and books from relevant local and national support organisations<sup>23</sup>, whom the participants could contact if they needed further support about the issues discussed. Once the interviews had been completed, I saved each of the audio recordings on my laptop under participant chosen pseudonyms, using password protected files. The interviews were then transcribed and disseminated to the participants who wanted copies.

Moving away from a procedural account of interviewing, to understanding this experience through the concept as research as rollercoaster; interviewing siblings was one of the biggest 'ups' of this PhD experience. I was genuinely fascinated, excited, and humbled by the rich variation in sibling perspectives and experiences, especially when interviewing more than one sibling from the same family. The semi-structured interviews were successful in capturing a diversity of participant meaning, as it allowed for enough flexibility to be participant led. Indeed, in some instances, the interviews were more unstructured<sup>24</sup>, where I asked one opening question and the participant was happy to construct their sibling experiences around this. Other participants needed more questioning, guiding and promoting. The interviews also appeared to be enjoyable for many participants, as illustrated by Angie, Molly and Silvia:

I enjoyed the interview because it's not something I usually get to talk about! It was good to reflect on my relationships with my sister (Angie)

It has been really helpful to me. I mean it is amazing how you have been interviewing me for research, but I have actually experienced it in quite a therapeutic way really, because I have actually seen that things with the family, that change over from being separate to being part of the family more in a way that I would not have seen it clearly. So that's been really really helpful, so thank you (Silvia)

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<sup>23</sup> This included Friends and Family of Lesbian and Gays, Loud and Proud, Outline, Childline, Croydon Gay Society, London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard, This Way Out Wales, Viva, Broken Rainbow, and the following list of contact numbers; Samaritans, Woman's Aid, Mind, Rape Crisis, NSPCC

<sup>24</sup> An interview technique with no set format or priori categorisation, but is based upon participant responses. See, for example, Fontana and Prokos (2007) for a discussion of unstructured interviewing.

I think it has been really good and I have enjoyed it, even though it has been, I mean I could tell I was getting a bit emotional because my hands were shaking a little bit and I did worry if I was going to cry or something, but you know be really upset, so I am kind of glad I didn't (Molly).

As Angie indicates here, research participation was enjoyable for her as it gave the opportunity to talk about her experience of having a heterosexual sister, which was something she rarely got to discuss in her everyday life. For others, like Silvia, participation was beneficial as it was experienced in a therapeutic way. This 'emotional unburdening' (Gabb 2010 p. 470) was also framed as a positive experience by many other participants; 'I have to say I was thinking of this as though it was a therapy session and that I really enjoyed' (Dragon), 'this feels like a therapy session... this is great, I can get it all off my chest' (Monkey). Scholars, particularly within a health context, have noted how therapeutic effects can emerge from qualitative interviewing and evaluations of treatment interventions (see, Dyregrov 2004; Grinyer 2004; Richard and Emslie 2000). Shamai (2003), suggests that the position of participants as 'experts' alongside the process of relating and reflecting on their life experiences, serves as 'healing event[s]' which can be therapeutic to individuals (p. 459). However, as researchers it is important to treat the therapeutic with caution. During the research process I felt very uneasy when participants made links between our interviews and therapy sessions. I specifically distanced myself from being a counsellor, making it clear that I was not professionally trained to 'help' or to provide answers to the questions the participants were asking about why people acted the way they did.

However, as hinted by Molly in talking about trying not to cry, one of the difficult 'twists and turns' of interviewing siblings was the emotion work that was experienced, both by the participants and myself. The interviews raised issues which, for some participants, were emotive, sensitive and painful. Discussions included positive and negative stories of coming out, loving and hateful sibling connections, family violence and suicide. Feminist scholars have paid attention to the role of affect in the production of knowledge and experiences of research (see Cook 1988; Fonow and Cook 1991; Stanley and Wise 1993). Indeed, as Stanley and Wise (1993) suggest 'the researched' will have feelings about us as much as we will about them, and also feelings (and theories) about the research itself' (p. 160). Furthermore, emotions have been understood to be a natural part of talking about and reflecting upon relational family living. Yet as Gabb (2010) indicates, 'it is unrealistic to expect all of

these emotions to be wholly positive' (p. 471). What, then, becomes important is how researchers actually respond to, and manage participant emotion (Gabb 2010).

In anticipating the emotive nature of research, I approached each interview with sensitivity, thinking carefully about what I asked the participants and the ways I asked it. I was careful to listen to my participants without offering advice or making judgements about what was being discussed, even when this contradicted by own beliefs and values (as explored earlier) (Gabb 2010). I also developed steps to manage potential participant risk or harm, such as encouraging the participants to 'pass' on questions they did not want to answer, taking breaks during the interviews, and stopping or terminating the interview conversation<sup>25</sup> altogether.

### *Sibling Sticker Charts*

In seeking to investigate some of the relational emotions when coming out to siblings, I developed a visual participatory method. Participatory methods, such as concentric circles (see Edwards *et al.*, 2006), spider charts and family trees (Gabb 2005) have been used with great success in the study of childhood and families, as a way of gathering data on relational connections and how and why certain emotions are linked to family occasions. To explore how everyday practices of sexuality were regulated, negotiated, and managed between siblings, before, during and after the coming out process, I designed a method called Sibling Sticker Charts. The inspiration for this method came from Jacqui Gabb's emotion map technique<sup>26</sup> in which she asked participants to map different coloured emotions (representing happiness, sadness, anger, and love/affection) on a predesigned floor plan of their home, as a way of illustrating emotional geographies of family spaces and how boundaries of intimacy and family sexuality were experienced in different contexts. For Gabb (2008) the objective of this method was to engage with 'abstract realm of emotions, feelings and connections with others', in order to 'produce material data on *where* affective encounters took place alongside discursive data around what characterised these exchanges' (p. 135). While Gabb designed emotion maps to generate knowledge about the geographies of intimacy and sexuality in the private aspects of family life, my method was designed to locate and chart the affective changes in sibling interactions, before, during and after coming out.

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<sup>25</sup> Some participants took the opportunity to have breaks, but no one wished to terminate their interview

<sup>26</sup> Emotion maps are an innovative visual method pioneered by Gabb, and introduced as part of her Behind Closed Doors, mixed qualitative research study (see Gabb 2008; 2009)

For this method, I designed two different charts; one for the LGB sibling and another for their heterosexual brother or sisters. I used a computerised male or female icon to represent brothers or sisters, with a slight variation in the colour of the icons for older, younger, or twin siblings (see figures 3.6 and 3.7). The charts were divided into three sections; before, during, and after coming out or your sibling's coming out. Three emoticon stickers were also designed to map onto these charts, with positive/happy experiences being represented by red smiley faces, challenging/difficult/confusing experiences by green and blue frowning faces, and negative/upsetting experiences with yellow sad faces. The aim of this method was to add further depth to understandings of interconnected sibling relationships and to generate new affective insight into the impact that coming out can have upon these connections over time.

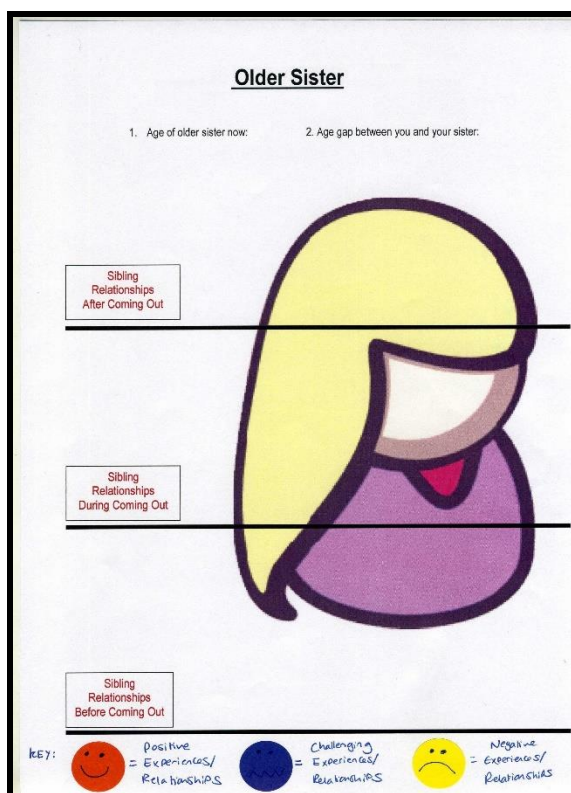


Figure 3.6 Older Sister Sibling Sticker Chart

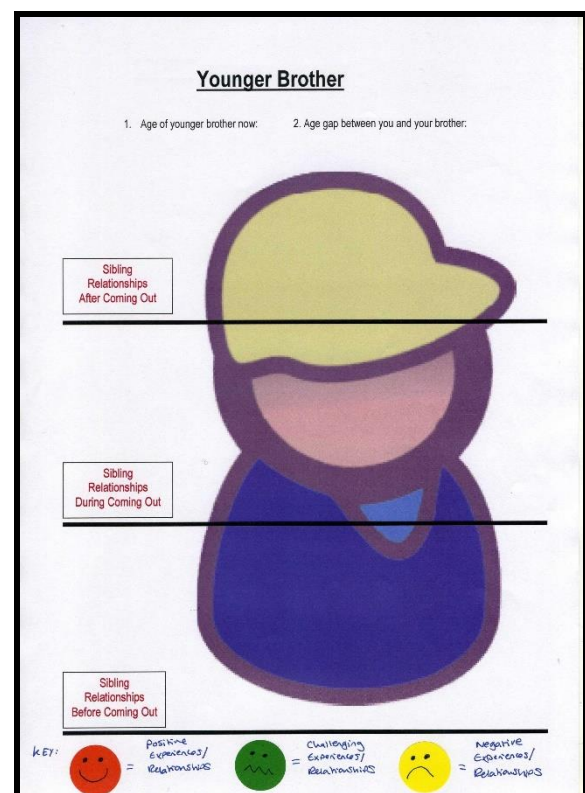


Figure 3.7 Younger Brother Sibling Sticker Chart

The Sibling Sticker Chart was introduced to the participants during the interview after the main themes/topics had been addressed. Each participant was given a sibling sticker sheet for each of their siblings, along with a collection of predesigned emoticon stickers, and a number of blank stickers to add their own faces, if they wished to map an emotion not captured by the stickers provided. The participants were asked to think about their sibling interactions in each of the three points in time and to

map which emotion and feeling represented that experience. The instructions for this task were kept as unstructured as possible, leaving room for participant interpretation and creativity in the style and content of this method. As the Sibling Sticker Chart was a new and unfamiliar method, I decided to be present while the participants completed these to help guide them through the task. I also wanted to talk with the participants while they created their charts asking them to describe what they had mapped and why these experiences were meaningful, significant and affective. The sibling sticker chart exercise lasted between 5-40 minutes, dependent upon how many siblings the participant had, how many emotions/ experiences were charted and what was discussed during the creation of the charts. Once the charts had been completed the participants were asked to keep hold of them until we met for the debrief four weeks later. I encouraged the participants to add any additional emotions, interactions, or experiences that they thought of or that occurred during this time. The sibling sticker charts were then collected and discussed with the participants in the debrief meetings. All 25 participants took part in this method; although not all returned the charts for analysis (see table 3.2).

The value of this method was that it generated visual, and to some extent, written and verbal data concerning the affective experiences of coming and being out in the context of sibling relationships. It offered an interesting snapshot of mundane, situated, everyday life between siblings and their practices of sexuality and intimacy. Although not its original purpose, this method also offered a glimpse into wider generational relationships as participants mapped emotions relating to the role that certain family members had in the regulation of sexuality between siblings (as explored in chapter four).

One of the significant 'ups' of incorporating a sibling sticker charts was that it appeared to be an enjoyable and engaging activity for the majority of participants. Many spoke enthusiastically about articulating their experiences in a visual, fun, participatory manner: 'that was a really really nice way of showing it in a kiddy kind of way' (K. Hepburn), 'it's quite a good interactive thing to do isn't it' (Louis). Furthermore, the flexibility of this method lent itself well to individual interpretation, meaning that participants could be creative in the production of knowledge, as demonstrated in the interesting variation in both style and content of the completed charts (see figures 3.8 and 3.9):



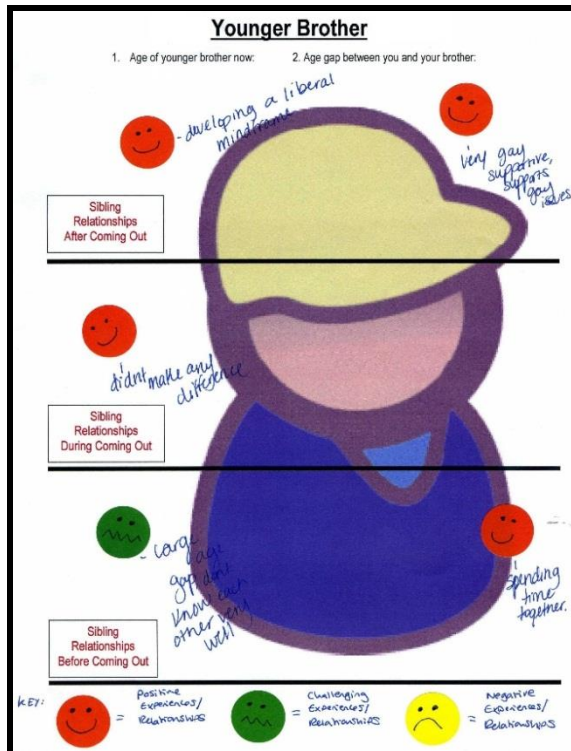


Figure. 3.8 Jen Sibling Sticker Chart

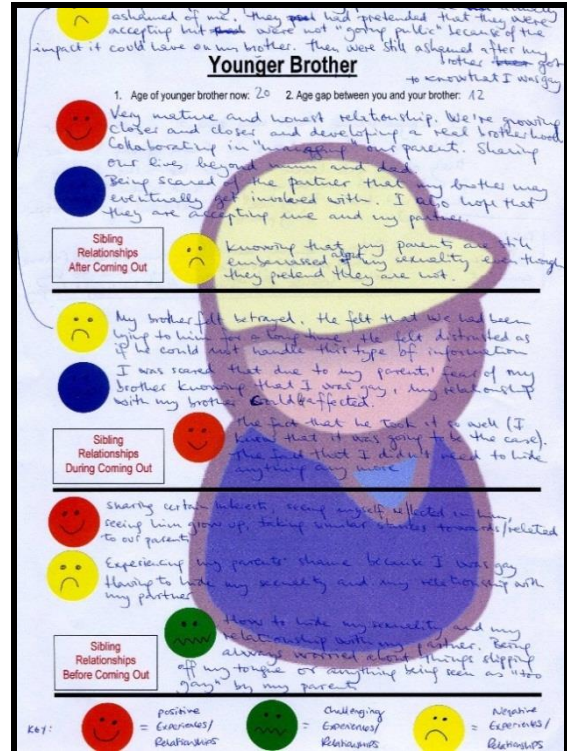


Figure. 3.9 Dragon Sibling Sticker Chart

These charts illustrate some of the different interpretations of the Sibling Sticker Chart exercise. Several participants also edited the existing emoticons to add emphasis to the emotion or to change its meaning. Molly, for example, created an angry face to represent how she felt about her brother's reaction to her sexuality (see figure 3.10). Audrey grouped three positive emotions together to add emphasis to an important change in the relationship with her brother (see figure. 3.11). She also mapped a challenging and negative emotion together to draw attention to her conflicting emotions about how she discovered her brother was gay.

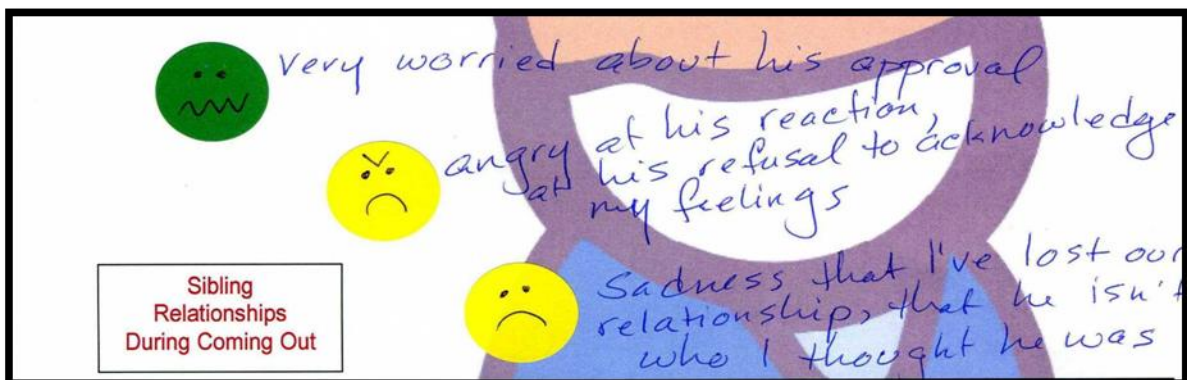


Figure. 3.10 Molly Sibling Sticker Chart



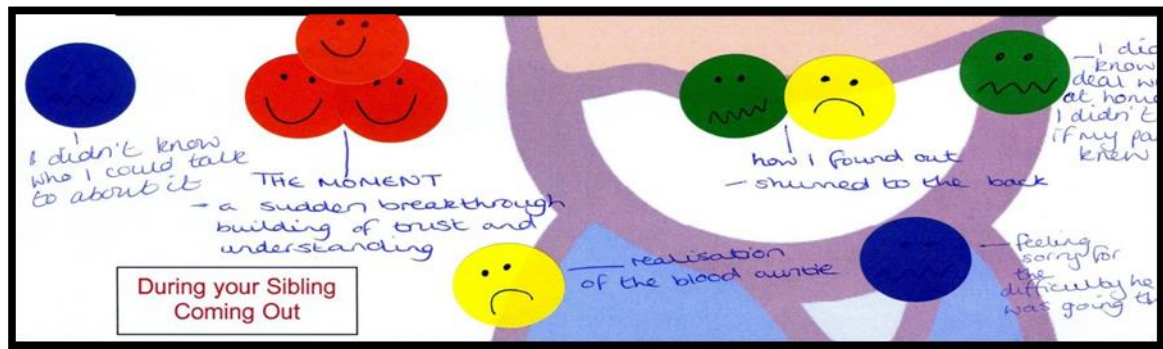


Figure. 3.11 Audrey Sibling Sticker Chart

Despite the advantages of this method, not all participants took to this task with ease and its implementation brought unexpected twists and turns. One of the most challenging aspects of incorporating a new method was that some participants appeared confused about what was expected of them, and even those participants who appeared to enjoy the process and were confident in their ideas, sought reassurance that they were doing the task correctly. Others found it difficult to articulate their emotions in such a symbolic way, or could not decide how/where to start this task. This meant that it was sometimes necessary for me to guide the participants more than I had anticipated, asking questions about how they felt at moments they had previously discussed in the interview. Charting emotions was also somewhat problematic for those participants who had a large number of siblings. One participant, for example, had eight brothers and sisters and another had five. Asking these participants to create individual maps for each of their siblings, in the context of the interview was therefore not feasible. In these instances, I asked the participant to choose one sibling to focus on in the interview and I asked them to take the other charts away with them to complete if they wished.

### *Diaries*

After the interviews had been completed, I invited the participants to keep a four week solicited diary<sup>27</sup> (Bell 1998). The reason for incorporating this method as part of a QMM approach was threefold. First, diaries have been argued to offer participants the opportunity to define their own boundaries of shared knowledge and to shape the research process by identifying what matters to them; their own priorities and concerns (Elliott 1997; Meth 2003). Second, producing diaries in the context of research has been argued to be empowering for participants (Meth 2003). Elliott (1997) also suggests that diary writing encourages participants to become more engaged in the process of research as they 'were

<sup>27</sup> Bell (1998) defines solicited diaries, as journals produced by participants at the request of the researcher

collaborators in the construction of the account and had a stake in the research' (p. 13). Finally I chose a diary method as they have been understood to be an 'unobtrusive way of tapping into the intimate areas of people's lives', which can be private or difficult to observe (Gibson 1995 p. 61), 'afford[ing] insight into ordinary, everyday sequences of activity and also flag up questions about their meaning and significance' (Gabb 2008 p. 42). I hoped that a diary method would be another form of data to enrich and extend understandings of relational sibling processes and the experience of coming out.

Despite the advantages of using diaries as a methodological tool in the study of siblings, my awareness of some of the limitations of this method – namely that 'keeping a diary can be time consuming, frustrating and perceived as time-wasting' (Meth 2003 p. 203) aided my decision to structure the participant diaries. The diary task was designed around four weekly themes; participants thoughts and feelings about their involvement in the research and what was discussed in the interview (week one), personal descriptions of themselves (week one), sibling make-ups and breakups (week two), the impact that coming out had upon relationships (week three), and sibling relationships in the past, present and future (week four). The participants were also encouraged to note down their everyday sibling interactions, or anything they felt was important to reflect upon. I asked participants to be as expressive as they wished with their entries, but also to make a note of the date, time, and topic under reflection. The diaries were designed in this way to capture everyday routine sibling practices, temporal changes over time, and reflections on the research process. All participants were given a diary folder, which contained a detailed diary guide, an A5 notebook, a pen, and a pencil. As a way of overcoming existing concerns with levels of literacy (Gibson 1995; Meth 2003) and problems associated with the effort and motivation need to complete written diaries (Hislop *et al.*, 2005) each participant was also given a digital voice recorder as an alternative means of diary keeping. The participants were also given the option of texting or emailing me their diary entries.

The diary exercise was one of the surprising 'ups' in the research as rollercoaster, in terms of successfully engaging the participants in the research process (Elliott 1997). Nineteen<sup>28</sup> participants kept and returned a research diary (written, typed<sup>29</sup> or audio<sup>30</sup>) and many appeared to put considerable time, effort and thought into completing this exercise. The majority of participants who did complete a

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<sup>28</sup>Six participants had chosen to opt out of this part of the fieldwork. Four were apologetic in explaining that they simply did not have enough time to dedicate to a 4 week diary task; one felt that he did not have anything further to say; and another did not respond to my requests to meet for a debrief and therefore did not hand in a diary.

<sup>29</sup> Two participants emailed me their diary entries

<sup>30</sup> Andy was the only participant who made use of the digital voice recorder and he recorded two short spoken entries, which were later transcribed.

diary also reflected upon how much they enjoyed this process, when we discussed this method in the debrief meeting (explored in the next sub-section). For Angel-Paul, it gave him 'a rare chance to reflect' upon the relationship with his brother in a way he had not done before, and for Louis writing was a 'liberating' experience.

These post-interview diaries proved to have many methodological values in researching the sibling coming out experience. They captured everyday sibling practices and moments of intimacy as they happened, that were not accessible through more traditional interview methods. Georgina and K. Hepburn illustrated this in their diary entries:

I have broken up with my partner this week. My brothers have all been amazing. I feel that our relationships are very strong and couldn't ask for more from them (Georgina Diary Week Four)

We had a crazily in depth but nice conversation the other day concerning a possible relationship break I may go on, and he was offering advice left, right and centre! It just shows he cares I suppose (K. Hepburn Diary Week Four)

Indeed, Meth (2003) indicates that one of the significant benefits of incorporating diaries is the 'temporal nature of the insight they offer' (p. 198). The longitudinal nature of diary keeping allows for flexibility in the accounts that are represented (Meth 2003). The diaries were also particularly useful for highlighting the relational connections with other family members and noting moments of celebration or tension in the everyday practice of sexuality. For example, Louis described his close relationship with his sister, and how she had brought her daughter up to be accepting of his sexuality.

[My sister] has a beautiful daughter, who adores her uncle and who, just the other day told me that I should 'find a nice boyfriend and settle down'. She is 4 by the way (Louis Diary Week Three).

In her diary, Nikki also wrote an entry after having a difficult and distressing experience with her mother-in-law. Nikki described having a family meal at her mother-in-law's house, and having to listen to her 'express some strong negative views about homosexuality':

I felt very uncomfortable as I felt I should speak up in [my sisters] defence, but didn't feel it was appropriate in front of our 3 children and 3 nieces and nephews... I've always been aware that she's got negative views about homosexuality – so I've never talked about [my sister] with her...That night I had to leave the house as I couldn't eat, I felt so uncomfortable (Nikki Diary Week Four)

As hinted in the extracts from Louis and Nikki, the diaries also revealed some of the complex emotions attached to processes of family life and also the experience of participating in research (as discussed in more detail in section three). These emotions were evident in Molly's first diary entry.

Been experiencing a lot of emotions since our interview on Tuesday. I felt very depressed Wednesday and Thursday, but I was expecting that. Grief and sadness underneath the depression; sadness that I can't have the sister relationship that other women (seem) to have. Anger at both siblings for rejecting and abandoning me (Molly Diary Week One)

The diaries also supplemented the interview data, as participants added more detail to experiences, or focused on an important issue that they had not mentioned or exhausted within the interview. Monkey's first diary entry was a good illustration of this.

I think I probably should have discussed jealousy a bit more when we met in person. I am incredibly jealous of the relationship that my brother has with my parents because he is so 'normal' – he has a wife, a child (and one on the way), a good job and loves hanging out with the family (Monkey Diary Week One)

Like Elliott (1997), I also found that one of the strengths of a diary method, was the interesting variety in the participant response modes in relation to depth, detail, style and content (see also Richardson 1994). Some participants, like Holly<sup>31</sup>, wrote pages and pages of detailed reflections on each topic, while others wrote only a single page for each week, or missed out weeks all together. Some accounts were rigidly written with only the set topics in mind, yet others wrote about experiences that were more

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<sup>31</sup> Holly's diary was one of the longest and was over 30 pages

relevant or important to them. In their diaries, participants did not just rely on the written word to communicate their thoughts and feelings, but timelines, bullet points, emoticon stickers (borrowed from the sibling sticker chart exercise, (see figure 5.6) were also used, adding depth and richness to the accounts (see figure. 3.12). This is demonstrated, for example in the drawing that Andy had in his diary to show the strength of relational connections between himself and his brother and sister:

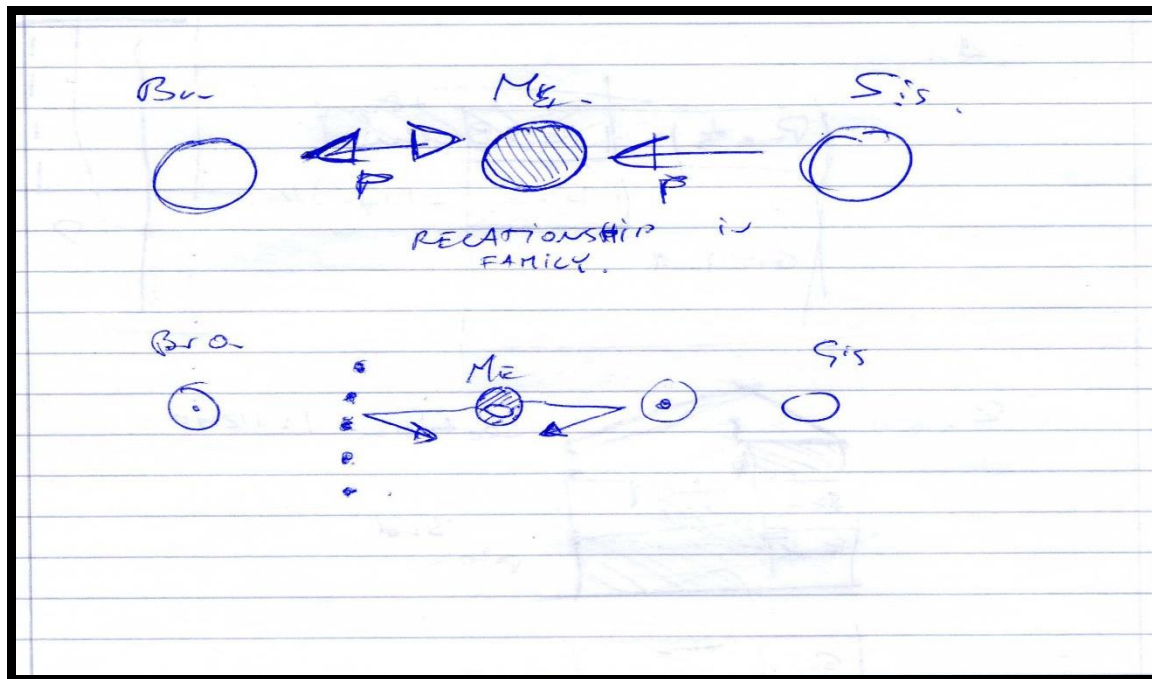


Figure. 3.12 Andy's Diary Illustrations

The use of diaries within a QMM approach was however, not without its methodological and practical limitations. Like other scholars, such as Meth (2003) and Bolger *et al* (2003), I found that one of the 'downs' of this method was that not all of the participants warmed to, or enjoyed the experience of keeping a research diary, especially as it required some time and effort to complete. Monkey, for example, discussed her difficulty in articulating her thoughts into written words. She was worried about making spelling mistakes and found it somewhat difficult to write using a pen and paper, in comparison to typing on a computer<sup>32</sup>. Other participants noted the practical struggle of not having enough time to dedicate to the writing task, or of feeling that they did not have anything different to add to a diary - 'I don't think I have anything new to add to the general topic of how I feel about the nature of these relationships that I didn't cover in the interview, so I'll leave it at that' (Simon). Furthermore, one of the

<sup>32</sup>Other formats were offered to each participant, including the use of a digital voice recorder, texting or emailing weekly entries

practical challenges of analysing diaries, as noted by Gibson (1995), was that it was sometimes difficult to read illegible handwriting, losing bits of data and the meaning constructed in these accounts.

### *Debrief Meeting*

After the diary period had come to an end, I invited each participant to attend a debrief meeting in the location of their choice. As I had designed the follow up meetings to be more informal (and over coffee and cake), the majority of these meetings were conducted in coffee shops (n=7) or pubs/bars (n=9), but several others were also carried out in people's homes (n=3) and via email (n=3). The meetings were structured around 5 main themes, including reflections about research participation, participant interpretations of the sibling sticker charts, a reflection on the diary process, and a discussion of how significant the participant's sibling relationships were after the coming out process. My decision to incorporate a debrief session, rather than a second interview is perhaps unusual among sociological research. This approach is more traditional within psychology, where follow-up meetings are often used to explain the actual purpose of the study (if it has been concealed), to help reduce any anxieties a participant may have, and to discover how the participant felt about their involvement (Blanck *et al.*, 1992). However, my choice to include this method was based on a desire to create a more informal environment where participants could reflect upon the research. This approach to debriefing, drawn from feminist methodology, sought to address concerns regarding the welfare of the participant and the reduction of any potential harm in the research process. The debrief session also provided the opportunity to note any changes to the sibling relationship since the interview and to have a deeper discussion of some of the research issues that were most interesting or relevant to the participants. In these meeting I was also able to present the participants with a debrief statement (see Appendix 2), which thanked them for their participation, reminded them how the data was going to be used and invited them to view and amend, if necessary, the final interview transcripts.

In many ways, this method was very successful and I met with nineteen of the participants (in person), with meetings lasting between 20 minutes and 3 hours. During these meetings I took notes, capturing interesting quotations and points for further discussion. One of the 'ups' of using debrief meetings was that the participants seemed to enjoyed meeting more informally, and many came equipped with insightful reflections about the research process as an entirety, which could not have come from the initial interview stage. Many talked at length about the aspects of the project that they found interesting, useful, difficult or upsetting, as demonstrated in the following extract:

I enjoyed being involved in the research, it made me think about my relationship with my brother and I hadn't really had a chance to think about it consciously before (Ellen)

This method also offered a glimpse into the ebb and flow of sibling (and family) interactions, and of any changes to relationships, over a relatively short period of time. For example, in the 4-6 week period since their interviews, Angel-Paul began talking to his brother again, Simon came out to his parents and sister, and Sue came to the realisation that her siblings had been 'amazing and supportive' about her sexuality. This type of data, contributes towards an understanding that relationships between LGB and heterosexual siblings, are complex, variable, and in a constant state of change, and that research processes can be powerful events in participants' lives. In addition, this method also provided an important space for the participants to ask questions about the research project, their data, and my own motivations for focusing on LGB siblings.

Despite these advantages, debrief meetings also presented several unexpected challenges, and twists and turns in the data collection. First, I had rather naively not taken into consideration tensions between public and private sexualities. This became apparent when one participant did not wish to discuss the research in a local coffee shop, and preferred instead to talk in their home. Second, I felt that the informal setting of coffee shops and bars tended to foster a more casual environment, where the boundaries between my role as a researcher and as a 'friend' became less clear. We often spent time talking about issues not related to the research, such as jobs, films, and relationships. This brought up questions for me about what was and was not considered to be data. Finally, attempting to record data via written notes was more difficult than expected. Rather than discreetly noting down interesting comments or points, I attempted to write every reflection, meaning that I often was not giving the participants my full attention. With these challenges in mind, I think it could have been perhaps more beneficial to invite the participants to take part in a second interview, rather than a debrief meeting. I could still have created a more informal environment and kept the reflexive questions, but I would have also been able to ask the participants to expand on the themes from the first interview. A second interview would have been more structured, with a clearer start and finish, and I could have used an audio recorder to capture the data, rather than relying on note taking. This was an interesting lesson that I will take with me to future research.

## *Thinking through Ethics*

Researching the experiences of siblings raised a number of complex and challenging ethical issues, which I argue, required an active engagement with a reflexive model of ethics. I adopted a feminist inspired approach to ethical practice that committed me to being a responsible researcher, honouring my commitments and responsibilities to the participants involved in this research (Mason 2002). In this section, I explore the two ethical dimensions that I embedded in (and through which I scrutinised) my research design. This includes attention to what Guillemin and Gillam (2004) call 'procedural ethics', meaning the process of seeking formal approval from ethics committees to conduct research with people. This often includes adhering to a series of ethical norms, standards and codes in order to protect the exploitation of those being researched (Morrell *et al.*, 2012). Recognising the limitations of ethical compliance before entering the field (as explored below), I also situate here, my approach to dealing with 'ethics in practice', meaning 'the difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research' (Guillemin and Gillam 2004 p. 262).

Boden *et al* (2009) suggest that as higher education has become the subject of growing management control technologies, we have witnessed increased regimes of ethical regulation for research, or 'new ethical bureaucracies' taking place in universities (p. 727). This new 'regulatory machinery' has embedded ethical rules and codes at the heart of organisational policies and procedures placing increased controls on social research practice in the UK (Boden *et al.*, 2009 p. 731; Morrell *et al.*, 2012). The speed at which these bureaucratic ethical controls have been implemented has been argued to reflect crises caused by biomedical research practice, alongside increasing institutionalised concerns with accountability and litigation, rather than with ethical practice itself (Boden *et al.*, 2009; Edwards and Mauthner 2002; Guillemin and Gillam 2004). At best, these controls have been argued to establish a bare minimum for ethical practice and the avoidance of harm (Mason 2002), and at worst for possibility 'catapulting UK social science research into new and potentially highly destructive modes of practice' as regulation speaks of correctness and not 'truth' (Boden *et al.*, 2009 p. 732).

As an ESRC funded, doctoral student at Cardiff University and a member of the British Sociological Association, there were, then, a number of ethical requirements and professional codes of practice that I had to adhere to in order to gain official permission to conduct my study with siblings (approved in 2011). Like Edwards and Mauthner (2002), I found these institutional codes of practice important for protecting the basic rights and the safety of research participants, and for serving as a useful starting point for alerting me to some of the potential ethical issues that could have arose during the process of



research. With an emphasis upon the key ethical principles of informed consent, privacy, confidentiality and the protection from harm, these codes helped me to consider how sensitive my topic of research could be, and to develop materials to help conduct myself ethically in the field (as explored below). However, like many other researchers (Birch *et al.*, 2003; Boden *et al.*, 2009; Edwards and Mauthner 2002; Guillemin and Gillam 2004; Mason 2002; Murphy and Dingwall 2001; Renold *et al.*, 2008) I also found that these codes were too abstract and separate, and thus provided very little practical guidance on how to deal with the ethically complex tensions and uncertainties of doing qualitative research with siblings, as shown below.

One of the fundamental procedural mechanisms deployed in the pursuit of preventing harm and exploitation in social research, is obtaining informed consent from participants. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) view informed consent as:

...an interpersonal process between researcher and participant, where the prospective participant comes to an understanding of what the research project is about and what participation would involve and makes his or her own free decision about whether, and on what terms, to participate (p. 272).

In order to make the nature, aims and processes of research transparent, each potential participant was given a detailed information sheet (see Appendix 3) that was designed using clear and plain language in an attempt to enable comprehension for all ages (16+). The information sheet specified the purpose of the research, what participation would involve, where the research would take place, and how the information would be collected and kept anonymous. The information sheet also conveyed the voluntary nature of the research and gave details about how the participants could withdraw up until the point of final write up. Prior to fieldwork, the participants also received a copy of a consent form (see Appendix 4), which they were asked to sign if they agreed to take part in the research, acknowledging their written consent to participate<sup>33</sup>. The participants were given the information sheet and consent form at point of initial contact and they were asked to consider their possible participation for 1-2 weeks, so they had enough time to make an informed judgement about whether or not they wished to participate.

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<sup>33</sup> I also initialled each box and signed both forms as a way of signalling my own commitment to the ethical practice

While informed consent is extremely important for ethical research, as Daly (1992) and others (see Miller and Bell 2002; Morrell *et al.*, 2012; Parry and Mauthner 2004; Renold *et al.*, 2008) note, the very nature of qualitative research renders the reality of informed consent problematic and can lead to a number of ethical challenges in the practice of research. Parry and Mauthner (2004) argue that one of the significant difficulties in obtaining informed consent is that researchers have very little knowledge of what will transpire during the course of a project; 'the reflexive nature of qualitative research, its use of unexpected ideas that arise through data collection and its focus upon respondents' meanings and interpretations renders the commitment to informing respondents of the exact path of the research unrealistic' (p. 146). This was an issue that arose during my research practice. Although I had discussed the general research topics with the participants prior to interviewing (and some asked to see the interview guide so they were informed of the themes that would be covered) several participants, like Patricia talked about their surprise concerning the range of emotive issues that came up in the course of research.

**Patricia:** I feel as if [the interview] has stirred up a lot actually, it's surprising. Just going back to childhood, you know...I never thought I would be sat here talking about when I took an overdose, you know?

**Sarah:** Stirred up in a negative way or a positive way? Or just made you remember?

**Patricia:** I wouldn't say it was positive or negative at the moment, just sort of umm (pause) a bit unexpected. Even though I knew we were going to be talking about sibling relationships I hadn't (pause) you know, it's crazy I hadn't even thought about when we were young, although obviously that was going to come up.

Patricia's extract is an evocative example of how research, particularly within families can take unexpected turns that the participant or researcher may not have considered. Patricia's account illustrated why it was important within my research to approach consent, not as a fixed and singular practice implemented at the beginnings of research, but as dynamic, flexible, and ongoing process that was continually renegotiated between the participants and myself at different stages of the research (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). Miller and Bell (2002) stress that ongoing consent is particularly important as the focus of qualitative research can shift and evolve, causing conflict between what the participants expect and what the findings show. Verbal consent to participate in each different stage of the research

(interview, diaries, and debrief meetings), was sought as and when appropriate, with an understanding that participation was voluntary. To enhance transparency, the participants were also given full access to their interview transcripts, diary entries, sibling sticker charts, and debrief notes. I encouraged each participant to review, edit or withdraw any data (or themselves) that they felt uncomfortable with (Daly 1992). Most participants requested their transcripts, although it is interesting to note that none of them made any changes to their data.

Confidentiality, anonymity and privacy were also important procedural ethics when researching the lives of siblings. In the ethics literature, confidentiality is commonly understood as the means through which participant identities are kept private/hidden from research findings (see Wiles *et al.*, 2008). Anonymity (i.e. keeping research participants/data free from identification), then becomes the vehicle through which confidentiality is operationalized (Wiles *et al.*, 2008). Baez (2002) argues that the 'convention of confidentiality' as he terms it, is upheld to protect research participants from harm, while maintaining their rights to privacy, and ensuring that ethical standards and integrity lie at the very heart of social inquiry' (p. 35). However, as Kaiser (2009) argues, maintaining confidentiality, while capturing rich and detailed stories of social life, presents unique challenges for qualitative researchers, which can be exacerbated when working *within* families (Gabb 2010).

Certain steps were taken within the research process to address issues of confidentiality. First, the participants were informed that, in conformity with The Data Protection Act (1998), the audio recordings, participant consent forms, diaries and sibling sticker charts would be kept in locked storage unit at Cardiff University, and placed in password protected computer files labelled with anonymous codes (Mauthner *et al.*, 2002). Second, following a feminist-inspired approach, I asked each participant to choose their own pseudonym, in an attempt to protect their identities (Leatherby 2003). It has been argued that asking participants to decide on a pseudonym gives them more agency in the protection of their privacy and more choice about how they are represented in the research process. I emphasised the importance of choosing a name that would conceal their identity (from those close to them and strangers), but I encouraged the participants to be creative with this decision, reflected in some of the chosen pseudonyms, such as Filius Banana Hammock<sup>34</sup>, Monkey and Dragon. Finally, in understanding some of the difficulties of maintaining confidentiality when researching within families, as Gabb (2010) warns; 'it is extremely difficult to conceal the identity of someone from those around them

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<sup>34</sup> A banana hammock is the name for a tight-fitting male speedo or swimsuit

– those who know their story’ (p. 468), it was extremely important to bring these issues to light and discuss confidentiality with each participant. Before the interviews began and again at the end I talked about the different strategies I was implementing to attempt to keep the participants’ identities hidden. For those participants whose brother and sister were also taking part in the research, I gave assurances that information shared in an interview would not be repeated or become the subject of questioning with their sibling. I also informed the participants that the data would be handled sensitively and changed if I felt their identities were at risk of being discovered. However, I also indicated that absolute confidentiality could not be assured (Wiles *et al.*, 2008), particularly from their siblings, who might be aware of their experiences.

I was however confronted with several ethical challenges of maintaining the privacy of siblings in practice. Similarly to Mauthner (1997), I found that negotiating and sustaining a private space to interview in the home<sup>35</sup> could be a challenging and sensitive issue. There was often a lack of physical space meaning that interviews had to be carried out in communal areas (such as living rooms and kitchens) that could be overheard or interrupted by partners, children, siblings, parents and visitors. One experience of interviewing a woman in an open plan living room<sup>36</sup>, while her other sisters were in the next room talking, laughing and fighting led me to wonder how much location could have impacted on the types of issues we talked about. Another example of being invited to stay for dinner with the group of siblings I had just interviewed (separately) and them successfully guessing one of the sibling’s pseudonyms<sup>37</sup> was a powerful illustration of how hard it is to keep identities hidden from those who know us.

I had also not anticipated just how difficult it would be to hide the identities of siblings when working with material from *within* sibling relationships. Trying to analyse and write up the comparative stories of LGB and heterosexual siblings without revealing their identities (to each other) was extremely difficult and something I spent a long time considering. Although I am still not sure if my approach solves this dilemma, I decided that the best way to try and protect the anonymity of the siblings who participated from the same families was to give them additional pseudonyms when being compared with each other or with sibling groups from other families (as illustrated in figure 3.2). This means that at times these siblings appear in the empirical chapters as their chosen research name, yet when compared with their

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<sup>35</sup> Several other interviews were carried out in coffee shops, restaurants, and bars, and it was equally difficult to secure a private space away from other customers and staff members.

<sup>36</sup> The participant chose to be interviewed in this part of the house

<sup>37</sup> This participant eventually decided to use another pseudonym

siblings I refer to another set of names. Noting the limitations of presenting double pseudonyms I was also very cautious about how and what data I was presenting when drawing upon the LGB and heterosexual sibling pairs and the other participants. At times I chose to omit data which I perceived to be potentially sensitive, harmful, or detrimental to sibling connections, should identities be revealed (Mauthner 1997). I also removed or slightly modified some additional characteristics such as age, ethnicity/nationality, occupation, and gender in an attempt to keep sibling identities hidden. Having the responsibility of making choices about the aspects of participants' stories to include or exclude, presented a tension for me between what Becker and Bryman<sup>38</sup> (2004) call 'disguise and distortion' (p. 345). I wanted to honour my commitments to participant anonymity, but I was also concerned that the process of anonymity could impact upon the original meaning of the data (Kaiser 2009), and I was unsure as to how the participants would feel about having their data modified (Corden and Sainsbury 2006). However, I chose not to take these specific modifications back to the participants as I was concerned that doing so would inevitably reveal the identities of their siblings.

#### **Section Four: Data Management, Reduction and Analysis**

The data collected throughout this research was managed and analysed in two different ways. Cross-sectional thematic analysis was carried out to allow for the similarities, differences, themes, and concepts to be identified and horizontally mapped across the participant data sets. The data was also analysed vertically through case study analysis for each participant and for the siblings from the same families. Gabb (2008) suggest that case study analysis can be particularly helpful in exploring family life as it can pull together different aspects of a participant's research account to 'present a particular story or version of events, experiences and/or emotions' (p. 58) and to focus on participants' 'understanding of their experiences; their versions of relationships with other family members and wider kin and friendship networks' (p. 59). While case study and cross sectional approaches have their own analytical value, Gabb (2008) suggests that the integration of vertical and horizontal analysis, accounts for 'synergy' rather than 'dissonance' between different methods, providing an opportunity for researchers:

...to capitalise on the multidimensional data produced through a mixed-methods approach; to broaden understandings about dynamic living systems through studying the inconsistencies and ambiguities of past and present family

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<sup>38</sup> See also Lee 1993

relationships. Set within this wider framework a whole picture of the individual and how family members interrelate begins to emerge (p. 62-23)

The process of qualitative analysis is often thought of as an on-going and fluid practice. Seidman (2013) comments on the difficulty of separating the 'processes of gathering and analysing data', as he argues that once fieldwork begins, researchers identify patterns and interpret meaning in the data as and when it is collected. Although I avoided any formal analysis until all of the data had been collected, twelve months in the field allowed time for thinking about interesting patterns and emerging themes in the data. I approached the analysis thematically, with a focus upon searching in and through the data 'identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes)' (Braun and Clarke 2006 p. 6). For the most part, I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) phased approach to analysis, starting with an immersion in the data, before moving on to coding, and searching for themes. However, as recognised by them, analysis was not a linear, but rather a 'recursive process', in which I moved back and forth through the different stages of analysis as and when new ideas emerged (p. 86).

### *Phase One*

In the first phase of thematic analysis, I attempted to become 'familiar with the depth and breadth of the content' (Braun and Clarke 2006 p. 16). As perhaps to be expected when adopting a QMM approach, the amount of data collected was substantial, if not a little daunting. I collected over 32 hours of audio diaries, 42 sibling sticker charts, 167 A5 pages of written diaries, and three minutes of an audio diary, 91 pages of typed debrief notes, and three of my own research diaries, all of which constituted the data for this project. The first task in immersing myself in this data was to transcribe, scan, sort, and actively read the complete data sets.

I transcribed all 25 interviews (lasting between 40 minutes and 3 hours) verbatim, taking account of pauses, laughter, and emphasis, in order to produce an accurate reflection of what was said and how it was spoken (King and Horrocks 2010). I was mindful of not 'tidying up' the 'messy' features of conversational talk by changing spelling, grammar, or deleting incomplete words (Silverman 2001 p. 163), choosing instead to signpost inaudible talk by inserting '[sic]' in the transcripts/diaries. Kvale (1996) does however caution that textual transcripts can never fully represent the interview conversation, as they 'are artificial constructions from an oral to a written mode of communication' (p. 163), which reflects a series of researcher judgements and decisions about what to include and

exclude. To remain close to the data as originally recorded (Wolcott 1994), I listened to each interview again, noting any errors or adding further emphasis to the original transcripts where needed. At different points in the data analysis, I also returned to the spoken accounts, when exploring new ideas or emerging themes. After the interviews had been transcribed, I wrote short interview summaries, which contained some of the basic demographics details of the participants, including pseudonyms, age, sibling position, number of siblings, age of coming out, etc. The summaries also gave a brief account of the interview content, including significant sibling events and key themes. I ended each summary with a description of how I felt the interview went and any important points about the interview interaction (e.g. the participant was shy, upset, guarded, happy, open, etc). These summaries were useful in mapping some of the initial codes, themes and comparisons within and among the data sets. Once the transcripts and interview summaries had been completed, I typed up the diaries and debrief notes into a word processing document and labelled them with the appropriate topics and weeks. The sibling sticker charts were also scanned into the computer. Once all of the data had been sorted, I created a folder for each participant containing their own data sets. Each folder was labelled using chosen pseudonyms, and stored (alphabetically) in two distinct groups: individual participants and the sibling groups.

The second task in familiarising myself with the data, was to read and re-read the text and visual data. I began actively working thorough the interview, diary and debrief data and marking passages which I felt were interesting or significant to the participant's story, and identifying meanings or patterns (Braun and Clarke 2006). During this early analysis stage, I used brackets and post it notes to highlight interesting segments of text. I also familiarised myself with the visual data. I drew handwritten tables, and organised the topics mentioned into the three affective categories on the charts; positive, negative, and challenging. Recognising that it is was impossible to approach a reading with a completely open mind, as my prior research, knowledge of the literature, personal experience, and epistemological/ontological framing would have influenced the categories of analysis (Patton 1980), I attempted to reduce the text inductively allowing the data (as much as possible) to speak for itself, while also noting themes or theory that had arisen within the existing literature.

### *Phase Two*

In the second analytical phase, I began to identify themes in the interview, diary, and debrief data using a combination of inductive open coding and theoretical or deductive coding. Inductive open coding is generally used in the initial phases of qualitative analysis to 'open up' the data and uncover ideas,

meanings, and concepts that emerge from within the raw data, which can later be organised into conceptual categories for analysis (Willis 2013). An inductive approach then, draws upon themes which are linked to the data itself, it is data driven (Patton 1990) and an analysis of such is 'a process of coding the data *without* trying to fit into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher's analytical preconceptions (Braun and Clarke 2006 p. 12). As far as possible, I attempted to allow the data to speak for itself, noting themes, patterns, similarities and differences that 'emerged' across the data sets. However, Braun and Clarke's (2006) caution against the presentation of themes as being 'discovered' or 'emerging' as they suggest that this is a relatively naive and passive account of the analytical process which denies the active role of the researcher in spotting patterns and themes (p. 80). Braun and Clarke (2006) propose that researchers are not able to 'free themselves of their theoretical and epistemological commitments, and data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum' (p. 80). Paying careful attention to these warnings, I also explored codes and themes from the interview, diary, sibling sticker charts and debrief data sets using deductive coding based on themes I discovered in the existing literature, my conceptual interests, previous research I had conducted on families, and my thinking about siblings (Braun and Clarke 2006).

I had originally planned to use the computer software package, NVivo, to assist with the inductive and deductive coding of data, yet like St John and Johnson (2000), I found that this process was a little sterile and I struggled to contextualise the bigger picture. Instead, I opted to work with the data manually, as I felt this enabled me to be more creative and interactive in selecting data. I performed a line-by-line sweep of each transcript/diary, using different coloured highlighters and post it notes to identify and interesting and repetitive patterns across the data sets. In coding the material, I adopted a similar approach to Ryan and Bernard (2003), in that I paid attention to word repetitions or topics that reoccurred in the transcripts, key words, and interesting metaphors, as well as significant events, behaviours, interactions, emotions, meanings, and consequences. Examples of codes included illness, conflict, closeness, school/university, gendered boundaries, and coming out. Identified codes were then matched with relevant data extracts, using assigned coloured highlighters. As I conducted further readings of the data, initial codes were evaluated and refined or merged in light of new ideas.

When the coding process was complete, I incorporated a broader reading of the data, where I organised the different codes into identifiable themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). I applied an informal technique of cutting and sorting, placing each code (and its description) on cards and reorganising them into themed piles. I also created mind maps for each participant that displayed the main codes



(assigned by different colours), which had been marked in their transcripts. I also did a broad reading of the sibling sticker charts and created a mind map to represent the main themes that cut across the data set. Similarly to Reason (2010), I found that these visual representations provided a useful process for thinking 'with and through' the complexity of material, drawing upon 'visual ability to spot patterns, shapes and connections' (p. 5). Once I reviewed and refined the themes in relation to the original coded extracts, and gave each a label and description (e.g. changes in sibling relationships after coming out)<sup>39</sup> (Braun and Clarke 2006), I gathered and sorted all of the data that was relevant to a particular theme, using Microsoft word to file longer and more contextualised excerpts of data (Seidman 2013). Through this process, I generated what Braun and Clarke (2006) call a 'thematic map' of the data, in which I was able to piece together a representation of the experience of coming out to siblings.

## Conclusion

This chapter has presented the design and implementation of my research strategy. I have outlined my epistemological and methodological underpinnings and shown how this has shaped the research design, process, and analysis. I engaged with a procedural account of how I conducted the research, while also drawing upon the research as rollercoaster metaphor to illustrate some of the messy realities (Jamieson *et al.*, 2011) of doing qualitative research with siblings. I have reflected on how interesting and dynamic research with siblings can be, yet at the same time I have also shown that this type of study can be complicated, emotionally exhausting, and ethically challenging. Throughout this chapter, I have argued that a qualitative mixed methods approach, drawing specifically upon the use of semi-structured interviews, sibling sticker charts, diaries, and debrief meetings, has produced a rich understanding of the fluid connections between LGB and heterosexual siblings. I suggest that employing creative methods can help move beyond the more rehearsed stories of coming out to account for the diversity in the experience of disclosure to families and siblings.

This chapter has also given a brief introduction to the 25 siblings, whose stories frame the following three empirical chapters. In chapter four, I demonstrate some of the complexities of coming out to siblings by indicating that relationships between brothers and sisters are experienced as part of wider intergenerational family connections. I argue that coming out is not always an individual decision made by an LGB person, but is rather one that is tied up in complex notions of family responsibility, respect,

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<sup>39</sup> A word document was created for each theme, which was given a label, such as: changes in sibling relationships after coming out, a definition such as: descriptions of what happened to their sibling relationships after they came out/ after they found out their siblings were gay, indicators, exclusions, and differentiations.

and commitment. This chapter engages with how sexuality is normally constructed and regulated in family spaces, and some of the consequences of hiding LGB sexualities from siblings. Chapter five focuses more narrowly on the actual experience of coming out to siblings, from the perspectives of LGB and heterosexual brothers and sisters. It shows that siblings play an important role in processes of disclosure, and suggests that heterosexual siblings often respond with shows of love, support, and compassion. The final empirical chapter accounts for the temporal changes to siblings relationships once non-heterosexualities have been revealed. I argue that coming out can transform sibling relationships, mostly for the better, but sometimes for the worse.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Coming out of the 'Charmed Circle'**

Dragon is 18 years old and is planning how to tell his parents that he is gay. Dragon is not particularly worried about how they will respond, as his parents have always been gay friendly. They have many gay and lesbian friends, and are very close with Dragon's gay uncle. Yet when Dragon comes out, his parents' negative reactions hurt and confuse him. Dragon's mother talks of the shame she feels at having a gay son, and mourns the loss of her imagined future as a grandparent. His parents ask him to hide his sexuality from other family members, friends and neighbours. They tell Dragon that he is not allowed to come out to his brother, emphasising that he is too young and too influential to know about Dragon's sexuality. Dragon's parents insist that it is their choice to decide when, or if, his brother should be told. Dragon challenges his parental request; he fights and argues with them, before eventually agreeing to keep his sexuality a secret. Dragon's sexuality becomes carefully monitored in the family, and his parents continually express their expectations for normal and abnormal practices of sexuality and gender. Dragon struggles to keep his sexuality a secret, hating the lies he tells and the heterosexual facade he creates. He feels stressed, anxious and resentful of the work he has to put into concealing his sexual identity. The relationship with his brother and his parents become more distant, as he separates himself from the family home. The secret of Dragon's sexuality is kept from his brother for 10 years, before their father finally tells him. Dragon's brother is devastated and not because he realises Dragon is gay, but because he has been deceived for so long. This creates tension and strain in the relationship between Dragon's brother and his parents.

#### **Introduction**

The vignette of Dragon evokes a subtle picture of some of the complexities of coming out to siblings. Part of Dragon's account conjures up a story of sexuality that we are already familiar with, namely that parents can find it difficult to accept their lesbian and gay children (see Beeler and DiProva 1999; Salzburg 2004; Savin-Williams and Dube 1998; Williamson 1998). Yet Dragon's account also suggests that parents who hold negative views towards LGB sexualities can play a significant role in regulating,

restricting, or as Nordquist and Smart (2014) suggest, 'blocking' the coming out process between siblings. Dragon's story, then, points to two important factors that have been largely marginalised from traditional accounts of coming out in families. First, his tale suggests the importance of situating the relationships between siblings and the process of coming out in wider intergenerational networks. Although this PhD focuses upon the sibling coming out story, when understanding processes of disclosure, I argue that it is often not possible to separate siblings from relationships with parents. As Nordquist and Smart (2014) indicate 'parents and children co-exist within networks of relationships in which they are embedded. Their lives are 'linked' together within and across generations' (p. 106). These generational connections mean that when a parent reacts unfavourably to their child's sexuality, they can put considerable barriers in the way of openness (Nordquist and Smart 2014) between LGB and heterosexual siblings. I argue, then, that analysing the coming out experience through the gaze of siblings provides a unique insight into the disciplined nature of sexualities in the family. Second, Dragon's story also casts a critical gaze upon the popular assumption that the decision about whether or not to come out in families, is autonomous, free, and made by an individual. Acknowledging the complex interrelationships between individual and family identities, Valentine *et al* (2003) argue that decisions about coming out are often 'embedded in an understanding of, and responsibility towards, wider family relationships and reputations' (p. 484). When the coming out process is framed in light of wider family responsibilities, commitments, and connections I suggest that it is possible to make sense of the decisions that LGB individuals make in agreeing to hide their sexualities from their siblings, despite the consequences this can have for siblings and families.

Many participants feature in this chapter, although it focuses mostly upon the stories of eight LGB men and woman who disclosed to their parents first and whose coming out experiences to their siblings were restricted in some way. In this context, it also pays attention to the story of one heterosexual sibling. This chapter engages with several important themes, including family practices, expectations and obligations and identity management to show how LGB sexualities are negotiated in families. I begin this chapter, by drawing on Rubin's (1984) conceptual framework of the charmed circle to illustrate how participant families reinforce ideas about what is perceived as right and wrong, and normal or abnormal in relation to practices of sex, sexuality, and gender. Using Rubin's framework, I present two analytical models which demonstrate how different families conceptualise 'good' and 'bad' sexual behaviours, and the consequences of this upon the coming out process between siblings. In the second half of this chapter, I focus mostly upon the stories of hostility from parents exploring what happens to LGBs and their siblings in families where non-heterosexuality is deemed bad, undesirable

or unnatural (Rubin 1984). Attention to parental hostility is not given because this was a universal or the most common experience of coming out in families<sup>40</sup>, but because I suggest that hostility operates in a particular way that impacts upon the expression of LGB sexuality and the relational connections between siblings and wider family members, and the practices through which these relationships are maintained. I argue that the expression of participants' sexual identities when parents had clear heterosexual and heteronormative expectations for them, and thus were relatively negative towards disclosure, was meticulously monitored and restricted in the family. I suggest that parents occupied positions of disciplinary power (Foucault 1977), where they were regulating the LGB person's decision about coming out to their siblings. In the third and final section, I show how keeping sexual secrets in the family presents a significant burden for LGB individuals, as well as for the family as a collective. I document some of the emotional, physical and moral challenges of maintaining secrets, and the detrimental impact that this can have upon siblings and wider family relationships.

## **Section One: Sexual Hierarchies in Families**

During the process of analysis it became apparent that participants were aware of specific norms and values that their parents held about practices of sex and sexuality in the family. Gayle Rubin's (1984) conceptual framework provides a useful structure for understanding how being accountable for these notions of appropriate and inappropriate sexualities, impacts upon the way LGB individuals come out and negotiate their lives when they have siblings. As indicated in chapter two, Rubin (1984) argues that sexual acts and lifestyles within modern western society are burdened with significance, and get appraised according to a hierarchical system of sexual value. Rubin (1984) developed an analytic framework to express the sex hierarchy, consisting of two concentric circles, which she termed the 'charmed circle' and 'the outer limit' representing the different cultural values attached to various sexualities. Emphasising the need to draw an imaginary line between 'good' and 'bad' sexual behaviours (see figure 2.1), Rubin (1984) proposes that sexuality in the charmed circle is constructed as 'good', 'normal' and 'natural' and any behaviour that violates these socially sanctioned rules is portrayed as 'bad', 'abnormal' and 'unnatural'. Rubin (1984) stresses that this pluralistic and extremely punitive social hierarchy of sexuality is problematic as it places controls on sex and is oppressive for those residing on the outskirts of morality.

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<sup>40</sup> Indeed, only a small number of participants experienced hostility or rejection from their parents. For most of the participants they were accepted and supported by their families.

Drawing upon Rubin's framework, I created two different models which detail normative and deviant sexualities that the participants felt their families held, and how these were situated in, and enforced by everyday family practices. These models were created as an analytical tool and were based on participant themes concerning family expectations, responsibilities, and rules that translated into clear instructions for them about practices of gender and sexuality in the family.

The first model, to which it was possible to assign ten of the participant families, contains practices which were characterised as 'good', 'normal' and 'natural', and using Rubin's (1984 p.153) framework could be located within a 'charmed circle' (see figure 4.1). This included open communication about sex and sexuality, heterosexuality and LGB sexuality, marriage or civil partnership, procreation, monogamy, relationships (or sex) with people of the same sex, sex with persons of legal age, and safe sex. In contrast, behaviours which participants constructed as 'bad', 'abnormal', 'unnatural' or 'damned' (Rubin 1984 p.153) and would reside in the 'outer limits' of the hierarchal system of sexual value in their families, included sex which was under the legal age, 'risky' sex such as sex without protection, having sex or being in a relationship with someone who is of a different generation (both younger and older), promiscuity, not having children or getting married, homophobia, and having closed communication about sex, sexuality or intimacy. The second model, which related to 13 of the participant families, perceived 'good', 'normal' and 'natural' behaviours as heterosexuality, marriage, pro-creation, and monogamous relationships or sex with people of the same generation, as well as hidden intimacy and a persuasive silence around the communication of sex or sexuality<sup>41</sup> (see figure 4.2). In contrast, behaviours which were perceived to be 'bad', 'abnormal', 'unnatural' or 'dammed' and were confined to the 'outer limits' included LGB sexualities, civil partnerships, having children in gay or lesbian relationships, and openly communicating about issues of sex. There was also some overlap with the first model concerning sex or relationships when underage or with people of a different generation, and promiscuity.

Before exploring these models in more detail, it is important to problematise them and acknowledge that not all participant families could be neatly fitted into these frameworks (or each section within each model), nor were they completely static. For example, although Holly had severe anxiety about coming out to her parents, as this meant having to articulate issues of sex and sexuality in a family that had a persuasive silence around this kind of communication, her parents were nonetheless accepting when

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<sup>41</sup> Within many of the participant accounts, such as Molly, there was an assumption that not talking about non-heterosexuality was illustrative of their parents negative views on the issue.

she did come out (via a letter), and supportive of her lesbian same-sex relationship. I therefore categorised Holly within the first family model. Dragon's story also raised a question about what model he should fit into. Prior to coming out his family could have been placed in the first model, as Dragon indicated that he had few concerns about his seemingly liberal and gay friendly parents. However, through the actual experience of coming out Dragon felt that his parents demonstrated their negative views towards LGB sexualities by preventing him from coming out, restricting the performance of his sexuality in family spaces, and ignoring his same-sex partner of ten years. Thus I categorised Dragon's family in the second model of sexual hierarchies. The fluid nature of families and family practices concerning sex and sexuality, and the difficulties it raised for placing families into distinct models was highlighted in Tara's account. Tara illustrated how her mother reacted very badly to the disclosure of her sexuality, how she created a lot of difficulties for Tara's sexuality in the family, which included pressure for her to hide her sexuality from her younger sister. However, towards the end of her interview account Tara reflected on the drastic changes that had occurred in the way that her mother valued practices of sexuality in the family. She described how her mother had become more accepting (although still made comments Tara perceived as homophobic), had welcomed a same-sex partner into the family, and was getting very excited about their up-coming civil partnership. In this chapter I characterised Tara's family in the second model, but explore the changes more fully in chapter six. Despite these limitations, these models are useful for highlighting the different practices of sexuality in families, and how the coming out process between siblings can be complicated and restricted by parents who perpetuate compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980) and heteronormativity.

### Charmed Circle (Purple)

Age appropriate sex  
Open communication about sex/sexuality  
Heterosexuality/LGB sexuality  
Marriage or civil partnerships  
Procreation  
Monogamy  
Same-generation sex or relationships  
Safe Sex

### Outer Limits (Red)

Under age sex  
No communication about sex/sexuality  
Homophobia  
No marriage or civil partnerships  
Not having children  
Promiscuity  
Different generation sex or relationships  
'Risky' sex

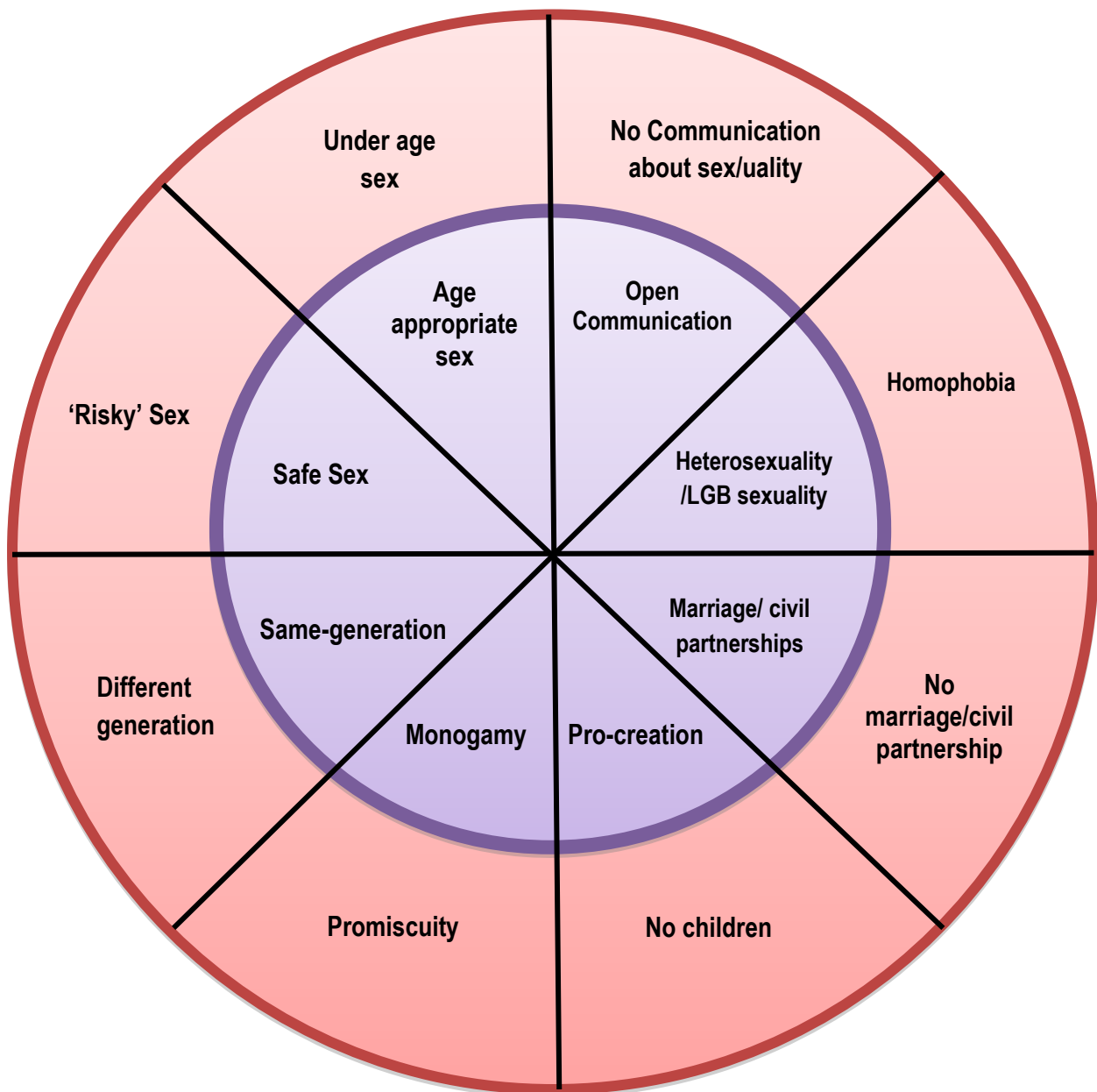


Figure 4.1 Family One's Sexual Values



### *Family One*

In this first model, where parents were often perceived as having liberal attitudes towards the categorisation of sexuality, and LGB sexuality in particular, participants recalled having few issues coming out to their siblings. The practices of open communication, coupled with the social acceptance of LGB sexuality meant that many of the participants, such as Angel-Paul, felt they were able to freely express their sexual identities with few restrictions from their parents. Furthermore, for many of these participants, disclosure to parents and siblings was often met with acceptance, love, and support. As one of the participants who framed his parents as open and accepting of LGB sexualities, Angel-Paul for example, described how his family environment meant that he was able to turn to his mother for advice and support when he first realised he might be gay or bisexual:

I snogged a bloke and I panicked, so I went to my mum's work... and I said 'mum I really got to speak to you' and she was like 'what are you in trouble?' and she took me into the staff room and I just broke down in tears going 'I am confused' and she was like 'what, what are you confused about? You can get a good job, it's going to be okay' and I was like 'no I think I might be bisexual or gay' and she was like 'oh' and then she was like 'we'll just work it out' and it didn't bother her (Angel-Paul)

Rather than reacting to his sexuality with shock, anger, or disappointment as popularly expected (see Beeler and DiPrio 1999, Gorman-Murray 2008; Savin-Williams 2001), Angel-Paul's mother accepted and comforted him during his time of distress. Some of the heterosexual siblings, whose families could also be categorised in this model, similarly showed how they accepted and supported their LGB brothers and sisters during and after disclosure. Fred articulated this in his interview:

It was just acceptance, but I think we were brought up to very much accept people as they were...I think, I think all of the family, all four of us [siblings] didn't have any hang-ups about [our sister's sexuality] at all, right from the start (Fred)

In addition to acceptance during the coming out process, participants indicated that their families continued to be supportive of their visible LGB lives once they had disclosed. This included the normalisation of their same sex relationships, which were monogamous and with partners of the same generation. LGB and heterosexual participants told heartfelt stories of how their families had opened up

their homes to same-sex partners, of them being included in special and everyday family events such as birthdays and Christmas, and the close bond that some family members developed with same-sex partners. In her interview, Rebecca, for example, talked at length about how her relationship with another woman had been accepted, celebrated, but most importantly to her, valued like any heterosexual relationship in the family: 'I mean everybody has accepted Miranda as my partner...You know we are treated the same as any other couple in the family'.

For some of the participants in this first model matters of risk around sex and sexuality were more likely to be of concern and within a family's 'outer limits'. It was, for example, sex with minors or significantly older generations, too much sex with too many partners, and unprotected sex that were deemed 'bad' or 'unnatural' and pushed to the outer limits of family sexual hierarchies. Filius, a young gay man, demonstrated this by recalling how his mother accepted his sexuality, but was concerned with his 'risky' sexual practices. In his interview, Filius described having an open sexual relationship with two different boys at the same time, who were slightly younger than him (he was 18 and they were 16). In coming out and confiding in his mother about these relationships, Filius described how she became very concerned with the moral and physical implications of his sexual practices:

She responded fine, though not long after she started coming, started getting worried about the idea that like (pause) yeah of like harmful things that could happen during sex and was very worried about those type of things (Filius)

For Filius, it was not his sexuality that conflicted with his mother's views about sex and sexuality, but rather it was his 'promiscuous' sexual practice that she viewed as risky and deviant. His mother's concern is perhaps not surprising given the very real risk of sexually transmitted infections from unprotected sex<sup>42</sup> between men, and the historic tendency to view HIV and AIDS as a 'gay disease'. Indeed, LaSala's (2007) work on gay youths and safe sex illustrates the persistent fear among parents that their gay sons would engage in risky sexual practices and leave themselves vulnerable to contracting diseases, such as HIV and AIDS. In his interview, Simon, another gay man, described how he would be reluctant to introduce a potential partner to his family as he tended to be attracted to older

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<sup>42</sup> It is important to emphasise that Filius did not talk about whether he was having protected or unprotected sex in his research account.

men, and this would be at odds with what they would expect, such as 'another nice student and person like you' (i.e. of the same generation).

This is a hard issue because it is kind of also complicated, well I feel like it is complicated also by the type of man I am attracted too [Sarah: okay], which um would be sort of older guys and um not sure how much I want to get into that now (laughing)...but it's sort of, I don't know, sort of a double, a double taboo kind of in a sense (Simon)

These findings suggest that coming out to families characterised within the first model would be relatively unproblematic, so long as LGB lives reside within the boundaries of acceptability. What Simon and Filius have demonstrated is that it is more likely to be the way that sexuality is practiced which comes under scrutiny in the family.

It is however, families that fall within the second model, which form the basis for the rest of this chapter. As indicated in the introduction, I suggest that it is important to focus on the families where LGB lives are perceived as undesirable or unacceptable, as hostility operates in specific ways that have very real consequences for the expression of non-heterosexuality between siblings and for the relational connections between family members.

### Charmed Circle (Purple)

Age appropriate sex  
No communication about sex/sexuality  
Heterosexuality/Heteronormativity  
Marriage  
Procreation  
Monogamy  
Same-generation sex or relationships  
Hidden Affection/intimacy

### Outer Limits (Red)

Under age sex  
Open communication about sex/sexuality  
LGB Sexuality  
Civil partnerships  
Not having children or LGB parents  
Promiscuity  
Different generation sex or relationships  
Visible physical affection/intimacy

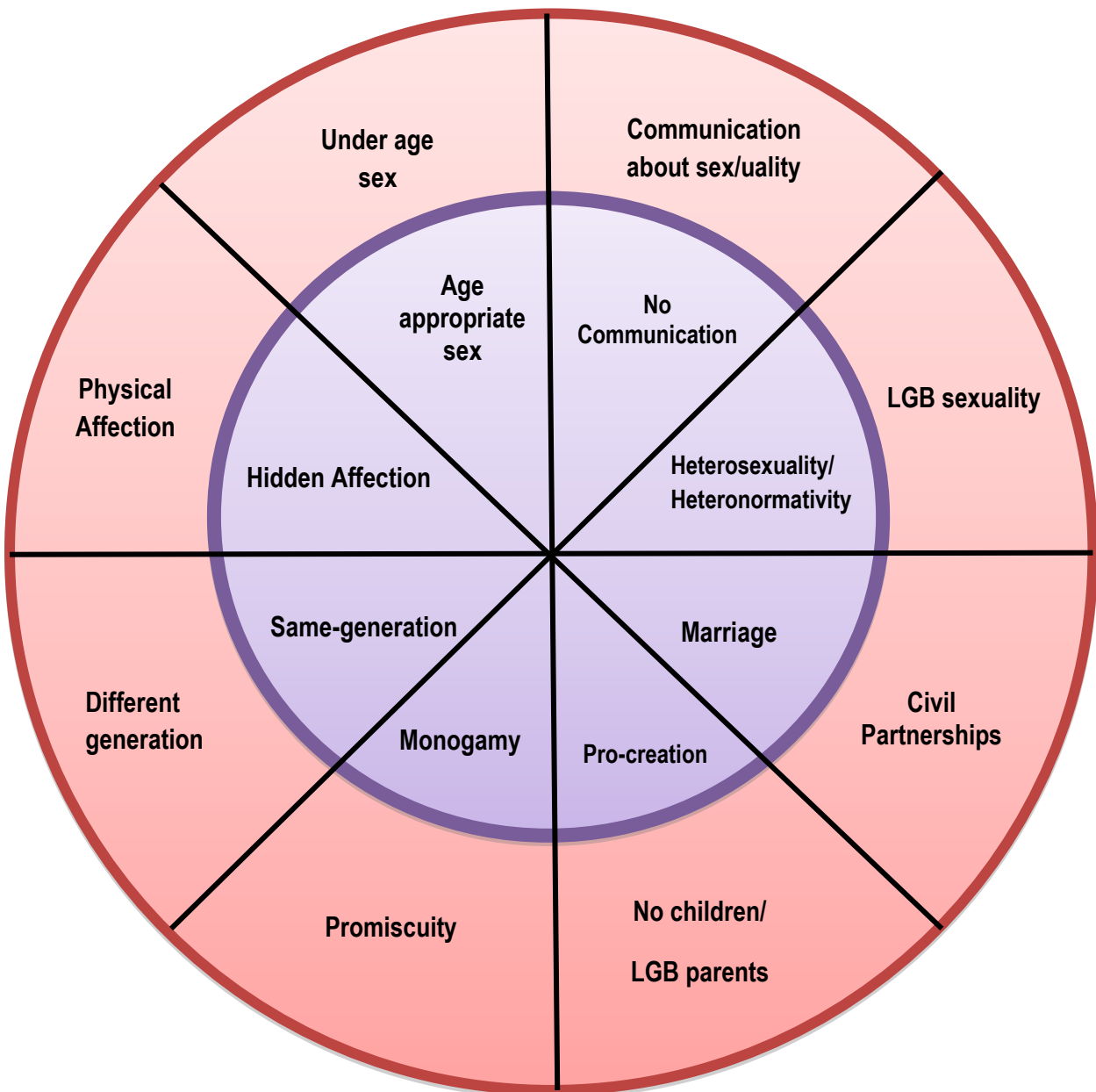


Figure 4.2 Family Two's Sexual Values

## *Family Two*

For the families that I categorised as falling within the second model, pre-existing ideas about heteronormativity (Warner 1991) appeared to be strongly assumed, expected and reinforced in the ways they thought and acted. The perpetuation of heteronormative values meant that coming out and declaring a non-normative sexual identity in these families was a worrisome task for participants; presented as 'a gamble and a risk' (Weston 1991 p. 48). For many, disclosing their sexual identities meant leaving the families charmed circle and putting at risk the imagined idealised vision of family life, or as Gillis (1997) suggests 'families we live by' (p. xv) that these parents had worked so hard to create. For some, coming out was difficult as it meant talking about issues of sex and sexuality in an environment which had maintained a silence around sex. Molly, for example, explained that she was raised in a 'sexually repressive environment', which meant that she did not have the language or knowledge for communicating her feelings:

So like I couldn't like talk to [my family] about stuff like that, you know we didn't talk on that level because we just didn't. Sexuality didn't exist in my family anyway  
(Molly)

In her interview Molly talked about how sex and sexuality was silenced between herself, her siblings and her parents. This deliberate separation of children from the adult world of sex can perhaps be understood in relation to discourses of repression and innocence. Writing about sex and sexuality in a Victorian era, Foucault (1978), for example, argued that there was a discourse of children's sex as illogically prohibited and denied. 'Everyone knew, for example, that children had no sex, which was why they were forbidden to talk about it, why one closed one's eyes and stopped one's ears whenever they came to show evidence to the contrary, and why a general and studied silence was imposed (Foucault 1978 p. 4). It was these characteristics of repression 'a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know', that Foucault (1978) attributed to the hypocrisy of bourgeois societies (p. 4). The portrayal of children as inherently asexual, but also at risk of being sexualised continues within modern society. Scholars have argued that there remains to be a deeply embedded discursive ideology of children needing protection from sex and sexuality; a discourse based on notions of innocence and corruption (as explored in more detail later in this

chapter) (see Epstein and Johnson 1998; Epstein and Sears 1999; Gittens 1998; Jackson 1982; Renold 2005; 2006; Thorne and Luria 1986).

Molly is not the first to raise these concerns, and the difficulties of young people talking to parents about sex and sexuality and equally parents talking to their children about these issues have been well documented in existing literature. Kirkman *et al* (2002), for example, indicate that all family members experience problems talking about issues of sex and sexuality, although fathers are argued to have the most difficulty addressing these topics (see also Kirkman *et al.*, 2001). Moore and Rosenthal (1991) suggest that children and young people struggle to talk about sex with their parents, and Rosenthal and Feldman's (1999) research showed that communication between children/young people and parents about the actual experience of sex was uncommon as many young people actively avoided these discussions.

In coming out, other participants had to confront and manage their parents' negative and hostile reactions to their sexuality, as it conflicted with their notions of appropriate and inappropriate family practice. Tara, for example, described how her mother reacted very poorly to the disclosure of her lesbian sexuality; 'I just had like a mouthful of abuse really, being how it was wrong and disgusting and that I needed counselling'. Jen too recalled how her mother responded in a negative manner to the disclosure of her sexuality:

So um I told my mum first and she like flipped. She didn't take it well. She is probably the most conservative of the family. [Sarah: How did she flip?] She didn't get angry, she was shocked. She didn't know how to talk about it and she was worried about telling the family (Jen)

Although Jen did not specify reasons why her mother was concerned about telling other family members, it is possible to surmise that she was either worried about how others would treat Jen, or about how her own social standing might be affected by being the parent of a gay child. Fields (2001) suggests that parenting can be a moral identity, linked to normative of raising 'normal' (i.e. heterosexual, gender appropriate) individuals. When children come out as being LGB and seemingly reject adequate socialization, parental moral identities can then be jeopardised and mothers and fathers can be implicated in the stigma of their children's sexuality (Goffman 1963). This concern of

'courtesy stigma' (Goffman 1963 p. 30), is something that has been widely acknowledged in existing parental accounts of disclosure (Herdt and Koff 2000; Salzburg 2004; Worthen and Davies 1996).

Some participants, like Molly, described the emotional distress that their parents experienced at the loss of their heterosexual imagined futures for their children and for themselves. Many of the participant's parents, and mothers in particular, articulated strong desires for them to get married and start families of their own, enabling their parents to become grandparents. The coming out process instigated crisis for these parents who felt they would not get the chance to be grandparents or to be able to share the experience of being parents, therefore changing the nature of their relationships and their identities. As Molly indicates: 'she burst into tears and said 'but don't you want to have children?'. As demonstrated in chapter two, this sense of loss has been captured by existing research, which suggests that when a child comes out as LGB, parents often mourn the loss of hopes and dreams they held for their child's future. Salzburg (2004), for example, indicates that parents can be hurt and disappointed that important milestones which mark a parent's and child's life (such as having grandchildren) are no longer relevant.

What was also interesting about families that I categorised in the second model was the different social rewards that were offered in relation to sexual practices. Focusing on the 1970s and 1980s, Rubin (1984) notes that it is the sexually privileged individuals who reside within the charmed circle, who are offered social rewards and benefits. She gives examples of 'certified mental health, respectability, legality, social and physical mobility, institutional support, and material benefits' (p. 151). When conceptualising the different sexual hierarchies in families, similar rewards appeared to be offered to those individuals who were adhering to sexualities within the families' charmed circle (e.g. heterosexuality, monogamous, same generation). A look at the heterosexual participant accounts, for example, shows how their heteronormative relationships were the most visible, celebrated, and respected within family dynamics. In the Campbell sibling paring, Audrey illustrates this in demonstrating how her boyfriend was welcomed into the family and invited to participate in important family events:

I have brought boyfriends home to meet the parents and go out for a meal or whatever and really try and introduce them to the family because I think family means a lot especially our family because we are close and you know I have had

boyfriends over New Years because we have always had some family over for New Years and have just introduced them, but Marshall can't have that because my dad, my dad, cos dad doesn't know (Audrey)

However, as Audrey indicates, her gay brother was not afforded the same social rewards within the family as LGB sexualities were considered to be beyond the 'outer limit' by his mother. As implied here, there was also a genuine concern that his father would not accept his sexuality, and the shock of the news could be enough to kill him due to a complex medical history of heart attacks, high blood pressure, and lung problems; 'I don't want to tell him in case it gives him a coronary' (Marshall). Rubin (1984) argues that sexual behaviours categorised as falling within the 'outer limits', which, in this example, is Marshall's gay identity, are subject to the 'presumption of mental illness, disreputability, criminality, restricted social and physical mobility, loss of institutional support, and economic sanctions' (p. 151). However, it was also interesting to note that heterosexual siblings could also be pushed to the 'outer limits' of a family's sexual hierarchy, for engaging in unacceptable practices of sexuality. Jason illustrated this when talking about the outrage from his father when he discovered that his youngest daughter was dating a much older man:

When she was 17 she started going out with this guy who was in his mid 30s and that was the scandal of the century... Dad didn't speak to Ruth for about three days [when he found out] and then gradually was alright again. Um but to this day really really can't stand that man at all, which um you know possessive father you can expect (Jason)

However, as Jason's accounts suggests, the time that his sister spends in the families 'outer limits' is short lived, as his father begins to communicate with Ruth after a number of days. His resentment towards her older boyfriend does however continue.

As demonstrated here, for those participants who were characterised within the second model, coming out was a worrisome and risky task. Disclosing non-heterosexuality meant going against the values of heterosexual decency and appropriateness that had been reinforced by parents. These participant accounts reveal some of the tensions between being an individual free to make choices and pursue their own happiness, against wider understandings of family obligations and commitments. The tension



between the individual and the family unit was particularly illustrated in the stories LGBs told about the restrictions they encountered from their parents in coming out to their heterosexual siblings.

## **Section Two: Regulating Sibling Sexualities**

In this section, I flesh out some of the complexities attached to the experience of coming out and consider some of the barriers for the participants. In thinking about disclosing to their siblings I consider how the expression of sexual identities is often negotiated in wider relationships with parents, suggesting that some parents occupy complex positions of what Foucault (1977) calls disciplinary power, in which they seek to manage and restrict the expression of sexuality in the family. As outlined in chapter two, Foucault (1977) introduced the concept of disciplinary power, to articulate how power can be exercised over a population through meticulous techniques of monitoring and surveillance. He argued that discipline operates as a mechanism of power, as people come to self-regulate their own behaviours in a given social institutions as they are not sure if they are being watched or not. In looking at the participants' stories, I suggest that that parents engage in disciplinary practices through the surveillance and restriction of their children's perceived deviant behaviours. It is also interesting to note the ways in which participants self-regulated (for example, by carefully hiding their LGB sexualities), as though they were constantly under scrutiny from their parents. This sub-section engages with themes of surveillance, silence, and compliance.

### *Cultures of Silence*

Problems concerning the practicalities of coming out to siblings in families that upheld strong heteronormative values (as illustrated in model two), arose repeatedly during the interviews. Although the majority of participants articulated a desire to come out to their siblings, many recalled how their parents regulated and blocked the disclosure process. Tara, Louis and Dragon, for example, all described coming out to their parents first, and how their negative reactions impacted upon their coming out experiences with their siblings. They indicated that their parents attempted to manage their sexuality through placing pressure on them to silence and conceal their identities from their brothers and sisters:

Mum always wanted me to hide [my sexuality] from Katie and um Katie was about 11 at the time, 10, 11, so you know [mum] said 'you mustn't tell your sister or let

her know'. It was quite difficult in the sense that I didn't believe I should be doing that (Tara)

I had already taken the first step out of the closet and here my mother was telling me to remain in there until *she* was ready to allow me to come out further (Louis)

[Mum] was always forcing me not to tell my brother, not to tell anybody...and I would argue, but [my parents] would say 'it is our child and you don't fiddle with his education' (Dragon)

For Tara, Louis and Dragon their desire to come out to their siblings was influenced by the ideas that their parents held about sexual appropriateness in the family. As heterosexuality was valued and part of the 'charmed circle', and non-heterosexuality was pushed to the families' 'outer limits' and deemed amoral or abnormal, coming out was restricted between siblings. As such, these quotations suggest that their LGB sexualities were negotiated and regulated around what Nordquist and Smart (2014) term 'cultures of silence' (p. 97). Their research suggests that 'avoidance, silence or non-discussion' were some of the ways that parents and children maintained their family relationships in light of hostility towards LGB sexualities (Nordquist and Smart 2014 p. 107). They suggest that discretion, as well as non-disclosure is one way in which LGBs are able to negotiate some form of family acceptance. For the participants in my research, I suggest that these extracts are suggestive of a significant disciplinary power, occupied by parents, of the sort described by Foucault.

These participants' experience of continual parental surveillance was extremely upsetting and difficult. Having deliberated on the decision to come out to his family, Louis recalled his anger and frustration towards his parents for insisting that he kept his sexuality a secret from his brothers and sisters until *they* were ready for them to know. Dragon too, discussed his feelings of powerlessness in having his sexuality continually monitored, restricted and silenced in the family home. The affective impact of being pressured to hide her sexuality was captured by Tara in her Sibling Sticker Chart. Tara maps a negative emoticon to illustrate how challenging she found it was to maintain this burden of silence.

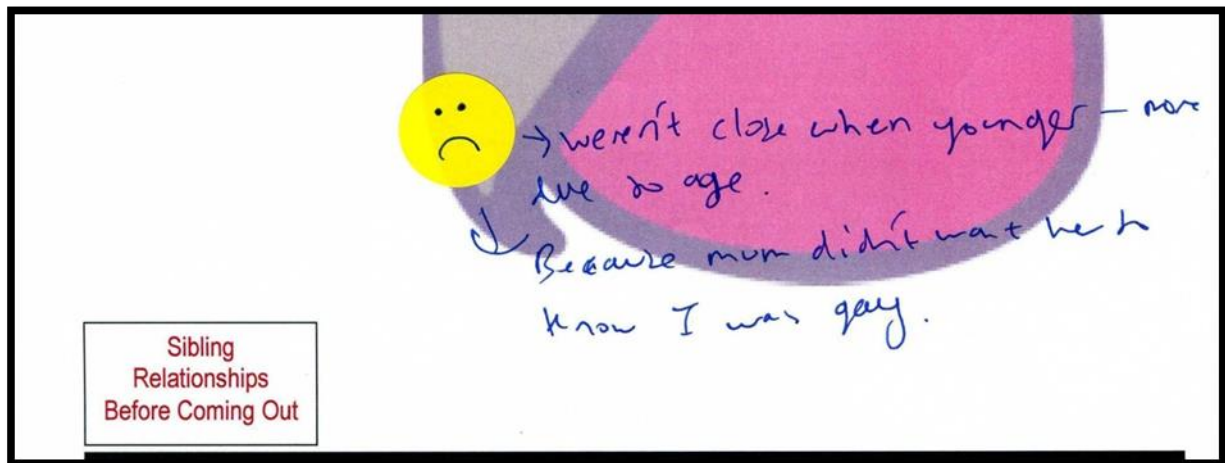


Figure 4.3. Tara – Before Coming Out

### Compliance

An interesting theme that appeared within the participant accounts was the notion of compliance. Returning to the stories of Tara, Dragon, and Louis, although all three of these participants pointed towards the serious implications of concealing their sexuality, upon their own well-being and for their family connections (as explored further in section three), they nonetheless all adhered to their parental pressures to silence their sexuality. They could have dismissed the wishes of their parents and come out to their siblings, but they all chose to conceal their sexuality. Furthermore, these were secrets that were kept for significant periods of time. As indicated in his opening story, Dragon self-regulated his sexuality in this way for 10 years, and Tara also recalled keeping her sexuality from her sister for 3-4 years. This filial compliance is quite important as it reflects some form of agreement or acceptance of sexual norms and values imposed by parents. It could also reflect a concern about the consequences that could arise if they had chosen to come out and disrespect their parents' wishes, such as rejection, estrangement, and stigma from their parents. What this compliance suggests is that thoughts about parents and family life are at the forefront of the decisions made about the coming out process for these particular participants. It is, then, important to consider notions of family responsibility, commitment and moral reasoning in processes of sibling disclosure.

As indicated in chapter two, some sociologists have argued that individualisation and de-traditionalisation have led to a diminishing capacity to commit to other people or to relationships (see Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Popenoe 1993), as illustrated in the decline of marriage for example (Lewis 2001). Other sociologists such as Jamieson (1998) and Duncan and Smith (2006) have agreed that there has been de-traditionalisation and this has meant that some institutions are no longer important,

giving some (but not all) individuals more choice. Yet, these theorists also argue that while the structure of relationships maybe changing, these changes have not undermined people's sense of commitment and connection to one another. Indeed, it has been suggested that people are 'energetic moral actors, embedded in webs of valued personal relationships, working to sustain the commitments that matter to them' (Williams 2004 p. 41). Family decisions or dilemmas then, are argued to be worked out in relation to a repertoire of moral values about care and commitment and understandings of the 'right' and 'proper' thing to do in, and for family interrelationships (Duncan and Smith 2006; Finch 1989; Finch and Mason 1991; 1993; Jamieson 1998; Williams 2004). As Neale (2000) argues, 'moral reasoning is inherently relational, in that it entails weighing up the circumstances and needs of others as well as and in relation to the self' (p. 10-11). Finch (1989) and Finch and Mason (1991; 1993) were the first sociologists to introduce idea about 'the proper thing [for family members] to do' in their research on kin negotiations about responsibilities for older family members. They discovered that support to kin was fluid, and that responsibilities and commitments were created through the dynamic interactions between individuals over time (Finch 1989; Finch and Mason 1991; 1993). They also identified the moral 'guidelines' that people live by for considering what is the right thing to do in the context of assisting and supporting relatives. Williams (2004) similarly indicated that when people are faced with dilemmas they draw on values of care and commitment to work out the 'proper things to do' in their relationships with people who are important.

It is possible to surmise that for the participants in this research, compliance evokes a sense of moral agency and an understanding of 'the right thing to do' in interaction with their parents. In not coming out the participants were reinforcing their commitments to maintain family connections, enabling them to remain active members of their family of origin, despite feeling let down or shamed by their parents intolerance of their sexuality. These commitments to the family are interesting, given that several of the participants strongly indicated that they would not stand for the same level of open hostility from their friends. In describing his coming out experiences to the friends he had made at university, Jason explained that he would sever his ties with anyone who was negative about his sexuality; 'it's like, you know what, if you don't like it then jog on<sup>43</sup>'. There is, thus, something about family relationships that matters and makes them worth maintaining. This compliance also suggests that the lives of LGB individuals and the decisions they make about the expression and performance of their sexual identities were practically and emotionally connected to their parents and the diverse and complex relational matrix in which these relationships were experienced. These findings strengthen Valentine *et al's* (2003)

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<sup>43</sup> Jog on is a way of telling someone to leave you alone or go away, often because they have angered or irritated you.

argument that the decisions to come out are often not based on individual decisions alone, but are also embedded in morally informed decisions about commitment, care and responsibilities to wider family relationships. Valentine *et al*'s (2003) pivotal work deconstructs the notion that coming out is an autonomous and free decision, entered into by an individual, by showing how the coming out process is often negotiated *within* a complex set of family relationships. Valentine *et al* (2003) suggest that, despite processes of individualisation, LGB individuals are still embedded in their families of origin, and that families are still important for financial and emotional support, and thus decisions about whether or not to come out are carefully negotiated in light of a responsibility to protect the reputations of their parents and siblings.

### *Restricted Performances*

Some of the participant accounts also indicated that it was not just the experience of coming out to siblings that was censored in the family. Further analysis revealed how the participants' performances of their sexual and gendered identities were subject to a constant watchful gaze by parents, especially within the boundaries of the family home. Tara and Dragon both described the restrictions that their parents placed upon the interests they had in popular culture, due to a concern that they might be perceived as being 'too gay' (Dragon), and would inadvertently reveal their sexuality. For Tara, it was her collection of popular gay and lesbian celebrities and LGBT cultural symbolism that was subjected to daily regulation:

I had like, sort of, a gay like pin board in my room, which I don't know, had rainbows and gay actors and whatever stuck on it [Sarah: laughing] and everyday my mum would come in my room and turn it around so like no one could see it you know, and then every day I would come in and turn it back around. I remember her doing that and not wanting [my sister] to see it (Tara)

This quotation illustrates, on the one hand, how Tara's mother tried to routinely monitor the performance of her daughter's lesbian sexual identity. Her mother was attempting to 'protect' her youngest child from the knowledge of Tara's sexuality (as explored later in this section), while reinforcing the home as a site of compulsory heterosexuality by rendering Tara's association with gay culture invisible. Yet, on the other hand this quotation also draws attention to Tara's subtle resistance towards the regulation of her sexuality. In turning her pin board back around, Tara was demonstrating

that she would not allow her sexuality to be rendered invisible within the family home. A look at Dragon's account suggests similar patterns of parental surveillance in relation to his cultural interests. Dragon described being 'banned' from listening to certain music or from watching films (e.g. *Mrs Doubtfire*) that his parents perceived to be related to gay culture, as a way of maintaining the secret of his sexuality from the gaze of his younger brother. The example that Dragon gives here concerning the restriction of watching *Mrs Doubtfire* highlights the extent to which the boundaries of sexuality were under surveillance in his home. *Mrs Doubtfire* is not a gay film, but rather is an American comedy about a father who disguises himself as an older female housekeeper, in order to secretly spend time with his children after a bitter divorce in which his ex-wife was granted custody of the children. Although this film did not depict gay characters it is possible to surmise that Dragon's parents were uncomfortable with the transgression of appropriate masculine gender norms (i.e. cross dressing), categorising this film as risky and beyond the boundaries of the families 'charmed circle'.

The need to preserve a carefully controlled performance of sexuality when living in, or returning to, home recalls the work of Johnson and Valentine (1995) on lesbian identities in domestic spaces. They indicated that, for lesbians who had not yet come out, their homes were far from being 'a private, secure location, a sanctuary, a locus of identity, and a place where inhabitants can escape the disciplinary practice that regulate our bodies in everyday life', but rather homes were a place where their identities came under surveillance and scrutiny (Johnson and Valentine 1995 p. 88). Under the watchful gaze of other family members, Johnson and Valentine (1995) argue that lesbians often have to restrict the performance of their identity, concealing cultural markers - 'hiding pictures of lesbian icon kd lang under the mattress and gay fiction behind the bookcase', as a way of maintaining the secret of their sexuality (p. 90). Johnson and Valentine (1995) also note that the performance of a lesbian sexuality is not just restricted to the boundaries of the bedroom, but are tied up in other embodied regulations. Drawing on Judith Butler's (1990) notion of the body, not as a 'being', but as a set of variable boundaries 'a surface whose permeability is politically regulated' (p. 177), and a practice which is inscribed within historical and cultural understandings of gender hierarchies and compulsory heterosexuality, Johnson and Valentine (1995) illustrate how the home can shape and restrict the lesbian body. They gave examples of women who covered up their tattoos, or dressed more conservatively in their parental home as a way of hiding their sexuality.

For the participants in my research, the constraints on the performance of LGB identities also did not lie solely within the expression of popular culture, but the findings alluded to other embodied restrictions.

Ellen, another participant who experienced patterns of regulation and restriction from her parents, recalled how her mother attempted to regulate her body, though restricting what she was allowed to wear to her birthday party:

So [mum] phones me up and we are having this chat and then we get into this conversation, and... she said to me 'what are you wearing on Friday?' and I thought random question, but I said 'probably jeans and a shirt and a jacket', you know I said 'I don't want to be too formal because it is not that kind of thing' [Sarah: Yeah]. To which the response was 'can you not wear a man's shirt because there are going to be people there that I work with' and I just thought this is not about the fact that it is the shirt that you have a problem with, it is the assumptions you think they are going to make (Ellen)

Ellen's example illustrates how lesbian bodies can be disciplined by parents, both in and outside of the parameters of the home. Although Ellen was a woman in her thirties and had long since left home, her extract indicates how her mother continued to manage and regulate her sexuality, through restrictions on what she was and was not permitted to wear in public. Inherent in these restrictions was her mother's concern that Ellen's bodily display of 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman 1987) contradicted socially constructed notions of ideal femininity (e.g. wearing dresses, having long hair, being thin and toned). In modern western society, clothing is one of the ways in which bodies become gendered (see, for example, Martin 1998). There are clear social ideas about clothing made and therefore appropriate for men, and for women, which is reinforced by notions of femininity and masculinity. In voicing her distaste at Ellen wearing a 'man's shirt', her mother was pointing towards the concern that Ellen's sexuality could come under scrutiny for failing to adhere to appropriate notions of cultural femininity and could be labelled deviant (i.e. lesbian). Reflecting the popular assumption that masculine clothing, appearances, and bodily traits are linked to stereotypical images of lesbianism, this extract shows how gender and sexuality are woven together, and how the maintenance of gender also reflects the maintenance of heterosexuality (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Ellen is also suggesting that the regulation of her body reflects her mother's desire to remain closeted as the mother of a lesbian, or as a mother of 'failed femininity', possibility due to concerns that she might be subjected to stigma by association (Goffman 1963), similar to Jen's mother as discussed previously. Although the women in Johnson and Valentine's (1995) work recalled similar experiences of embodied regulation, the difference between their experiences and those of Ellen's (and also Dragon and Tara), is that it was the

parents, not the LGB individuals themselves who were working hard to render LGB identities invisible within the space of the home.

### *Reasons for Regulation*

A more detailed analysis of patterns of parental regulation and the reasons that drove this reveals some interesting themes in relation to gender, age, and a fear that non-heterosexuality could be 'leaked' or could influence the sexualities of others. Firstly, there appeared to be an interesting gender dimension to the regulation of sexualities. In the previous quotations by Louis, Dragon, Ellen and Tara they all indicated that their mothers played a pivotal role in the censorship of their sexuality. It is perhaps not surprising to note that it was the participants' mothers who regulated the expression of sexuality, especially as it is women who have been traditionally burdened with the responsibility of educating their children about sex and sexuality (Martin 2009). There is also an argument that one of women's responsibilities in the family is to sustain a harmonious domestic setting, though the emotion work they do (see Duncombe and Marsden 1993). This emotion work, which is argued to be a fundamental component of women's gendered family identities, includes managing and maintaining family interactions and relationships by 'monitoring, smoothing, cajoling, persuading, calming, negotiating, organising' (Allan *et al.*, 2011 p. 88). That is not to say that fathers did not feature in the stories of censorship. They did, but they were often described as playing a less dominant role in preventing the participants from coming out to their siblings. It could be that mothers had a stronger position in regulating sexualities in families, and in these cases did so as a way of protecting their husbands from this knowledge, or as a way of protecting their sons and daughters from their father's anticipated negative reactions. However, the accounts indicated that fathers tended to follow the mothers' rules, even if they did not agree or did not feel it necessary to censor their child's sexuality. Dragon, for example, described how his dad was more accepting and supportive of his sexuality, in comparison to his mother, yet Dragon felt that he used his mother's discomfort as a reason to keep him in the closet:

Dad, even though he has always been more supportive than my mum, he always used my mum as an excuse not to take action...Saying 'well we are not telling your brother or our friends because your mum doesn't feel comfortable with it' (Dragon)

The less prominent presence of fathers in the participants' accounts is interesting, as it contradicts existing literature which suggests that fathers have a vested interest in cultivating the (hetero)sexual



identities of their children, and in particular their sons (Kane 2006). Solebello and Elliott's (2011) work, for example, reveals the accountability and desire that fathers often feel towards crafting the heterosexual and heteronormative identities of their sons. It is also interesting considering the tendency to portray fathers as the least accepting family member (Ben-Ari 1995; D'Augelli *et al.*, 1998; Herdt and Boxer 1993; Savin-Williams 1990; Telljohann and Price 1993). In this research, the participant accounts suggest that their fathers could be more supportive than their mothers, and were less concerned about their child coming out to their siblings. For Tara, for example, it was her dad who provided support and love when her mother was being homophobic: 'I remember once like crying to my dad because mum was ripping off posters from my wall and I was like "hug me"'. It was also interesting to note that for participants like Tara and Dragon, it was their fathers who did eventually reveal their LGB sexualities to their siblings in a supportive way.

In recognising the regulatory behaviour of their parents, the participants provided explicit rationalisations as to why *they* thought their mothers and fathers sought to monitor the expression of their LGB sexuality in the family. Religious beliefs, pre-existing homophobia, shame, and a fear of stigma (Goffman 1963), were presented as likely reasons for the concealment. The two reasons that appeared to hold the most resonance were, however, the age of the participants' siblings, and parental fears of contagion or recruitment to LGB lifestyles. In the accounts of Tara, Dragon and Ellen, the fact that their siblings were significantly younger than them (the most being 12 years) was presented as an important issue in the regulation of their sexuality. Some of the mothers portrayed their (heterosexual) children as being too young and innocent to understand and to cope with the disclosure of their siblings' LGB sexuality. As demonstrated by Ellen:

I said to my mum 'look I need to tell Patrick about [my sexuality], this is ridiculous' and she, she from a defensive point of view said 'oh he is *too young*, he is *too young to understand*' (Ellen)

Although Ellen expressed a strong desire to come out to her brother, who was four years younger than her, Ellen's mother felt that he was too young to know about non-heterosexuality. It was something specific about the age of Ellen's brother, which acted as a deterrent in the disclosure of her sexuality. It is helpful to analyse these findings in light of normative discourses on sex, sexuality and the family. It is possible to suggest that the request for sexual regulation and censorship between older and younger

siblings reflects the social discourse of the innocent and vulnerable child, who needs to be protected and hidden from the knowledge, and the practice of sex and sexuality.

Existing scholars have drawn attention to the strong social narrative that refutes childhood sexuality (see Epstein and Johnson 1998; Epstein and Sears 1999; Gittens 1998; Renold 2005; 2006; Thorne and Luria 1986). These theorists have argued that in modern western societies, that there is a discursive separation of sex and sexuality from children (particularly early and pre-teenage years) in that they are thought to be pre-sexual or asexual. As Emma Renold's (2006) explains 'the 'child' and 'sex/uality' not only continue to be presented as oppositional and incompatible, but unthinkable when it comes to children of primary school age (4-11 years old)' (p. 490). At the heart of this narrative is the powerful discourse of the 'innocent' child, who needs to be sheltered from the knowledge and practice of the dangerous and corrupting adult sexual world (Epstein 1994). Knowledge about sexuality, then, is constructed as a threat to the perceived innocence and cherished discursive ideology of the asexual young, and gives rise to fears about the corruption of the young (Epstein and Sears 1999; Scott *et al.*, 1998).

The romanticised view of children as sexually innocent has been criticised for being deeply problematic and treacherous for children (see Epstein and Johnson 1998; Faulkner 2012; Giroux 2000; Kitzinger, 1988; 1990, Jackson 1982, Renold 2005; 2006). In their work on schooling and sexualities, Epstein and Johnson (1998), for example, suggest that although sexuality forms an important part of schooling experiences - though play, talk and imagined futures, discourses of childhood innocence has fostered the persuasive silence of sexuality in schools (see also Epstein *et al.*, 2003).

Putting the terms 'schooling' and 'sexuality' together is the stuff which scandal can be, and often is, made... As the popular press would have us believe, sexuality is not a proper part of schooling, neither are schoolchildren ready to learn about sexuality (Epstein and Johnson 1998 p. 1).

Epstein and Johnson (1998) suggest that the desirability of innocence, not only misrepresents the position of young people as having a lack of sexual curiosity, but these ideas can actually endanger those who are experiencing sexual harassment or abuse. They draw on Kitzinger's (1988; 1990) work to show how ideologies of innocence can restrict communication between children who have been sexually abused, and adults who may be able to help them. Drawing attention to children's gendered

and sexual relations and identity work in primary schools, Emma Renold's (2005) research also shows how the embedded discourse of the innocent child and organisational heteronormativity within primary schools works to silence the more negative aspects of children's sexuality, like teasing, harassment, and gendered power. The sexualisation of innocence is also argued to be gendered, classed, and raced – in that it is the hyper-sexualisation of young, white, middle class girls that has evoked the most social concern (Giroux 2000; Kitzinger 1990; Walkerdine 1999). The anxiety over appropriate/inappropriate aged sexualities is, for example, evident in the rise of governmental and media moral panics concerning the 'premature' sexualisation of girls, from commodification and sexual imagery in the media (see Renold and Ringrose 2011).

Although problematic, these ideas of innocence provide a useful lens for making sense of how parental sexual hierarchies can be shaped by wider social discourses, and how this can impact upon the way that sexuality is perceived, expressed and managed in the family. In the case of Dragon, Ellen and Tara, the fear that drives these social norms was convincingly used by their parents as a way of regulating the coming out process between siblings. Moreover, the ubiquitous nature of this discourse, and the lack of alternative accounts to be able to refute it, makes it a relatively strong and compelling argument for maintaining the family status quo by self-regulating their sexuality. Ellen demonstrates the power of this discourse, by indicating her compliance with her mother's insistence that her brother was 'too young' to know:

I think part of me went along with that simply because there was an element of truth in it, from the point of view of the fact that up until a certain point he was still quite young in his outlook (Ellen)

Linked to concerns about age, parents also appeared to manage the expression of LGB sexuality between siblings due to a fear that disclosure could promote different sexual 'choices' to younger brothers or sisters, or inadvertently 'turn' them gay or lesbian. Tara discussed her mother's fear that coming out and providing her younger sister with knowledge about LGB lives, could potentially 'turn' her into a lesbian. As she describes below:

My mother thought that if [my sister] knew what gay was, she would turn out gay or something. Mum thought that you know, you could turn people gay, she probably still does to a certain extent (Tara)

Dragon similarly stated:

My mum was scared of me turning [my brother] gay and she is still suspicious of him. I mean my mum doesn't sleep and now and then she gets all, all worried and accusing [to my brother] 'you are not telling me enough about your life, are you gay or are you straight?' (Dragon)

These parental fears resonate with a contagion hypothesis, which reflects a deeply rooted fear that 'homosexuality' is somehow contagious and that an LGB identity can be formed as a result of exposure to knowledge about their lives, or interactions with LGBs. The account of Dragon also reflects his mother's concern that he might be seeking to recruit his brother to a gay lifestyle. These concerns can be understood in relation to serious international moral panics about children and sexuality, and in particular children and 'the figure of the homosexual' (Robinson 2008 p. 114). Robinson (2008; 2013) argues that historically, 'homosexual' or queer individuals have been discursively and mythically constructed as inherently predatory folk devils, 'paedophiles or recruiters of young children into a perceived lifestyle of hyper-sexuality, sexual abnormality and depravity' (Robinson 2013 p. 55). This type of social anxiety or 'queer fear' (Epstein 1997 p. 190) towards LGBs and the threat they pose to the corruption of the young can be seen in many different cases. Robinson (2008; 2013), for example, draws attention to the National moral panic that erupted in Poland in 2007, over the concern that the BBC television programme *Teletubbies* was promoting a 'homosexual' lifestyle to children, as one of the characters (Tinky Winky) was perceived to be a boy carrying a handbag. The difficulties LGB teachers have experienced, is also illustrative of the fear that is associated with the danger of sexuality and childhood innocence (see Epstein 1997; Epstein and Johnson 1998; Evans 1999; Fifield and Swain 2002; Harbeck 1992). Epstein (1997), for example, outlines the story of Jane Brown, a lesbian head teacher from a primary school in London who turned down the offer of tickets to a *Romeo and Juliet* ballet at the Royal Opera House, and the way she was used in the popular media to (re)produce a range of discourses about sexuality and schooling. Epstein (1997) suggests that implicit in the media representations of Jane Brown was the assumption that being lesbian (or gay) was incompatible with being a teacher. Not only was the visibility of LGB sexualities perceived to corrupt the supposed innocence of children, but this story reflects the popular mythology of gay teachers as sexual predators

and inherently dangerous to children<sup>44</sup>. Epstein (1997) concludes by suggesting that Jane Brown's punishment for being a lesbian teacher acts a stark reminder of the risks that teachers face in coming out, and also the energy that is devoted to the 'policing of heterosexuality' in schools (p. 201).

As indicated in Dragon's previous quotation, there was also a sense of permanency to the parental fears about contagion or recruitment, with the accounts indicating that parental concerns had not diminished over time, even though they come out to their siblings who continued to identify as heterosexual. Tara indicated that her mother continued to believe that innocent children can be drawn to the lure of LGB sexualities and 'turned' gay. Similarly, Dragon recalled how his mother frequently articulated her fears that her youngest son could still be influenced and recruited by Dragon. As a consequence, she often questioned the sexuality of her youngest son and demanded that he told her more about his personal life. Tara and Dragon's parents are not alone in their fear of contagion and the passing of Russia's LGBT Propaganda Law in 2013, which was endorsed by president Vladimir Putin with the purpose of protecting children from exposure to homosexuality as a 'behavioural norm' and preserving 'traditional' family values, acts as a striking illustration that these damaging and discriminatory values are still entrenched in some societies.

### **Section Three: The Cost of Concealment**

Choosing to disclose an LGB identity to family members has been argued to bring with it a number of risky consequences for individuals, including disownment, rejection, and emotional and physical harassment (Savin-Williams 1998). In this section, I explore the effect that the silencing of sexualities can have upon patterns of family relationality. I argue that it is important to scrutinise the ways in which LGB sexuality is subjected to disciplinary practices in the family, because hiding LGB sexualities can have even greater consequences for LGB individuals and for family relationships as a collective.

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<sup>44</sup> Other scholars, such as Evans 1999, Fifield and Swain 2002, and Harbeck 1992 have also pointed towards the American and British cultural narrative of gay teachers as sexual predators and the deeply rooted fears and dangers that LGB teachers face in coming out or being found out.

*Personal Consequences: 'I can't be myself at home' (Jason)*

Several of the LGB participants in this research reflected upon the significant personal consequences of having to hide their sexual identities. Those who occupied what Valentine *et al* (2003) termed 'paradoxical space' in families in that they were simultaneously 'in' and 'out' of the closet, or Donovan *et al*'s (1999) concept of 'layers of outness', in which people are out to different people at different times, talked of the need to establish multiple identities or create double lives in order to successfully maintain their sexual secrets. Central to these stories of double lives or multiple identities were themes of migration. Several participants spoke of their decisions to move away and spatially separate their LGB identities from their home environments (i.e. where they lived with their parents) which were portrayed as homophobic or heterosexist. Ellen, for example, described how she had to spatially and socially compartmentalise her lesbian identity from her family life as a way of managing her parents' desire to keep her identity hidden from her younger brother:

I keep [my sexuality] all here, so when I then make the journey home, a lot of it I sort of leave here emotionally (Ellen)

Staying here has been a work related decision, but also a personal one – being out [at home] was never a pleasant thought! (Ellen Diary Week One)

Inherent in Ellen's statement is a distinction between her life at home and the life she created as a lesbian. Ellen is suggesting that she lives two different lives, which are geographically and emotionally separated. Away from home, Ellen embraced her identity as an openly proud lesbian. She was out to her friends, neighbours and colleagues, and she was an active and visible member of the LGBT community. Yet for Ellen to make the journey back home, she had to leave behind her lesbian identity and adopt a heterosexual facade, paying careful attention to appropriate gender norms (i.e. 'no man's shirts') and conversational talk. For Ellen, home became a place where she had to present an edited version of herself in order to hide her sexuality:

If anyone has ever been in the closet at any time of their life they will tell you that is exactly what you do, you anonymise, you sanitise, you edit your life. So I think I probably did a certain degree of that with [my brother] (Ellen)

Occupying two different identities and living differently in two domestic spaces, meant that Ellen was unable to share important and interesting aspects of her life with her brother, with whom she had always had a close and open relationship. In hiding her lesbian identity, she had to filter out certain experiences, jobs, friends, and significant others from her sibling. In her work on lesbian identities, Valentine (1993) mapped similar stories concerning the creation of multiple sexual identities and double lives. Valentine (1993) argues that one of the ways in which lesbians maintain a life of sexual secrecy which is free from discrimination, is to create double lives by establishing geographical boundaries between their different sexual identities. Valentine (1993) showed how some of the lesbian women in her study, like Ellen moved away from spaces where they had an established heterosexual identity (such as the family home) in order to create a new public sexual identity among strangers.

Jason also talked about creating a double life in which he geographically separated his life at university as an openly gay man from his life at home as a closeted man. Like some of the participants in Taulke-Johnson's (2009) work on gay male undergraduate's experience of student life, Jason made a link between moving away from home to study at university and his feelings of exclusion from his family. As the home represented a space in which Jason had to present himself as heterosexual as a way of avoiding potential crisis or breakdown in the relationship with his father; 'I still haven't come out to my father because I really don't know, my mum said 'don't tell your father, because I don't know what he is going to do'. Jason deliberately chose a university that necessitated a migration from where he lived with his family; '[my university] is 280 miles from home'. For Jason it was not just a geographic displacement from his home that was important; he also talked about wanting to distance himself from his 'conservative' home town or community as he depicted the residents as 'quite set in their ways, certainly in terms of their views to sort of, to sort of equality and fairness'. Jason alludes to his community being governed by traditional conceptions of appropriate gender and sexuality, meaning that any deviations from these would be viewed as undesirable. Jason constructs the experience of moving away as the liberation needed from his family to come out and create a new sexual identity at university:

I think the hallmark moment came when I left to go to university when I could be myself and just say 'look this is who I am' and I could embrace it (Jason)

University afforded Jason the space to come out to people in a way that he had not been able to do at home. Jason was careful to acknowledge that he did not 'go around with a flag or a sign' overtly advertising his sexuality, but that moving to a space that was supportive enabled him to disclose to his friends or people who explicitly asked him if he was gay. This process of coming out was also very positive for Jason as he was accepted by the majority of people at university:

I had been out [at university] and it had been fantastic. Everybody was really accepting, you know nobody cared and that I think was the biggest thing to find out was that nobody really, you know they don't really care and that is really reassuring because I thought that they would be like 'oh god', it would be difficult, but it wasn't and it was nice and I thought you know having had that complete sort of acceptance and freedom and peace of mind [at university] (Jason)

In contrast the constant vigilance, negotiation and separation of his sexuality from his family of origin meant that the family home for Jason, and also Ellen, represented a site of tension (see also Johnson and Valentine 1995). At odds with the traditional ideologies of the home as a haven, free from the harsh surveillance of the outside world (Allan and Crow 1989, Saunders 1989, Somerville 1992), the family home represented an oppressive space where they felt they did not belong. Their homes became what Donovan *et al* (1999) referred to as 'a sphere of exclusion' (p.699), a place of façade where it was necessary to disguise, separate, and lie about who they were in order to maintain the secret of their sexuality bestowed upon them by one or both of their parents. The consequence of this was that Jason and Ellen actively avoided visiting their family homes, choosing only to return for what Gillis (1997) refers to as ritual events, such as Christmas, birthdays and funerals.

Going home, it is not that I don't, it is not that I don't want to go back, but it is just that I don't enjoy going back, because I don't feel that I can be the same person at home that I am [at university]. I am much happier somewhere that is not at home (Jason)

I am the only one, of my side of the family, who went away and has stayed away. It is a long standing joke that I only make an appearance at funerals now (Ellen)



As the quotations illustrate, for those LGB individuals whose sexuality was concealed and regulated in the family, the home represented a space that was routinely avoided. For some of the participants this experience of separating themselves from their families of origin, along with the relentless pressure to conceal and regulate their sexual identities, created negative consequences for their emotional and physical well-being. Some discussed their experience of coping with anxiety, distress, isolation, and feelings of loss. Marshall, another gay man, reflected upon the damaging personal costs of having to hide his sexuality:

I have been on and off, massively depressed and I think that is probably as a result of this big pressure at home... there is always this spectacle looming over me...So it is difficult, it really is difficult and I don't really know what the best thing is to do. At the moment [my sexuality] is the skeleton in the cupboard and it's something I would like to address because it is terribly stressful (Marshall)

As he had not yet come out, Marshall felt pressure to 'pass' as heterosexual and was unable to be himself at home. Marshall explains that this constant need to self-regulate his LGB identity amplified his battle with depression and instigated a pattern of suicidal thoughts and tendencies. Dragon also recalled the practical and moral difficulties he experienced in having to keep secrets from his younger brother, whom he had a previously close and honest relationship with:

I have always been really open about my sexuality and hiding it from my brother who is an important person in my life, was really hard...I didn't like all the, all the pretending, all the lying...yeah and my relationship with my partner, we were always worried that things would slip of my tongue or mmm anything being seen as too gay by my parents (Dragon)

Outside of his family, Dragon is an out and proud gay man, who is in a long-term relationship with another man. Yet, what was conveyed in his account was the sense of difficulty he experienced in having to regulate the expression of his sexuality. Dragon was uncomfortable with having to lie and separate his identity (and his significant other) from his brother, feeling that these actions threatened the very elements of their close and intimate relationship, namely knowing and caring for one another (Jamieson 1998). Not only did Dragon disagree with the reasons for keeping these secrets, his

account suggests that the practicalities of having to filter his life caused him a great deal of anxiety and distress. In his Sibling Sticker Chart, Dragon mapped challenging and negative emotions to emphasise how difficult this experience was for him.

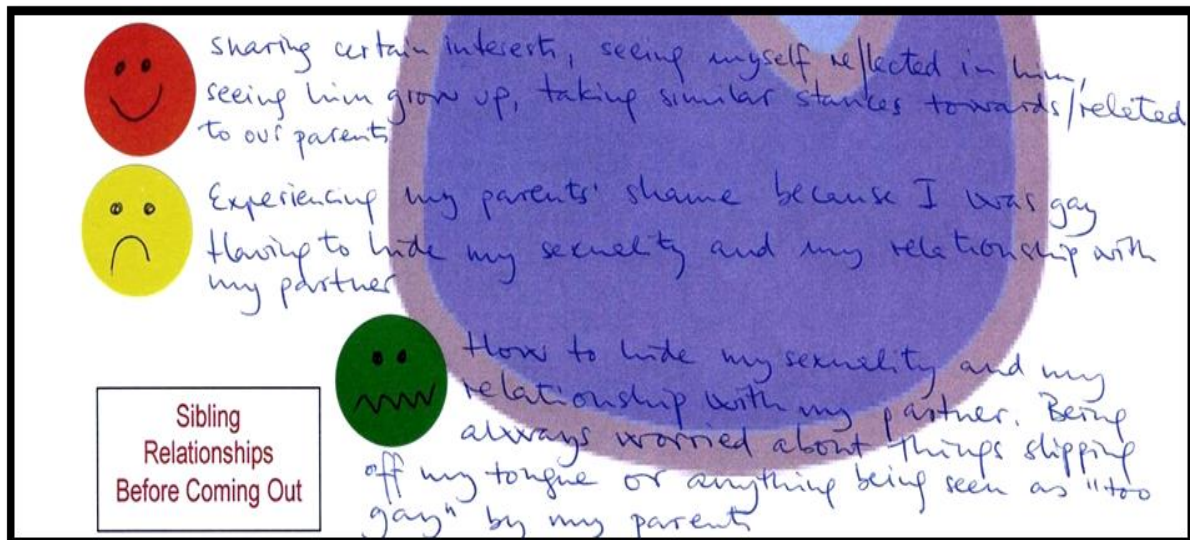


Figure 4.4 Dragon – Before Coming Out

The accounts of Dragon and Marshall allude to some of the emotional, physical, and practical consequences of having to hide their sexuality in the family. These claims are consistent with existing research which suggests that the concealment of sexuality can have a number of unintended individual consequences, including stress (Miller and Major 2000), lower relationship satisfaction (Mohr and Fassinger 2006), as well as negative mental health costs, such as distress and suicide (Morris *et al.*, 2001). Furthermore, Dragon's account, along with Jason's, Marshall's and Ellen's, suggests the active work that has to be put into keeping secrets of sexual identity. In her book *Personal Life*, Carol Smart (2007), indicates that keeping secrets in families is not a passive activity, but rather that secrets have to be actively worked on and practiced in order to be successfully maintained. According to Smart (2007), keeping secrets in the family requires intense skill, vigilance, and determination as well as constant regulation, which Dragon for example, found problematic, stressful and exhausting in the context of his relationship with his brother.

### *Family Problems*

In addition to difficult consequences for LGB individuals, several participants also indicated how keeping sexual secrets could impact upon the family as collective. For some, the practicality of leading multiple lives and of having to lie and conceal their identities was not only stressful, but it served to create fractures in wider family relationships. For example, enforcing strict rules about the regulation of sexual expression was seen to negatively affect the relationship between some of the participants' mothers and fathers. Here it is useful to draw upon the interrelationships between heterosexual and LGB participants that featured in this study, to demonstrate some of these tensions.

A look at the Symonds's sisters shows how the relationship between parents can encounter some level of conflict or turmoil when they have different views about their child's sexuality and the need to hide this from their other children. Grace, a young lesbian, described how her mother responded very negatively when she discovered that Grace was a lesbian. In contrast, her father was more accepting and did not agree with his wife's perspective or her demands to keep Grace's sexuality a secret from their other children. This secret caused a significant amount of tension and conflict in the parents' relationship; they fought, argued, refused to communicate with one another, and became distant. As the following quotations illustrate, the strain on their relationship was recognised and felt by all three of the Symonds's sisters:

Um and I remember my parents arguing over [me coming out] and my mum calling me a dyke and my dad getting really pissed off with her and then they never spoke for like a week (Grace)

You know my parents didn't talk for ages because you know [dad] just didn't like the way [mum] went about it (Bonnie)

I think because my mum, because my dad was more accepting of it than my mum, it did cause a little bit of tension. My dad was like 'why can't you just deal with it like I am dealing with it? Don't make it a big issue. Don't make her feel bad about it', kind of thing. I think that is when it caused a little bit of tension (Leah)

What the Symonds sisters' accounts suggest is that mothers and fathers may have different sexual hierarchies of their own, and conflicting ideas about what sexual practices reside within the charmed circle, or outer limits. When these differences become apparent, as in this example, these diverse values can cause tension in family relationships.

In addition to tension between parents, family relationships can become strained and difficult when the secret of someone's sexuality was specifically hidden from one family member (e.g. from a single sibling, or a mother or father). As Valentine *et al* (2003) illustrate, people rarely come out to their entire families all at once, but are more likely to stagger the coming out process, dependent upon their understanding of their relationships and how people are likely to respond. However, in so doing, it is inevitable that some family members are kept in the dark. In his work on disclosure, Savin-Williams (1998) hints at some of the difficulties that this can create for family members. Drawing on the example of siblings, Savin-Williams (1998) suggests that if a young person discloses to their brother or sister prior to their parents, it can create an awkward and burdensome position for them, where they are torn between maintaining the trust of their sibling and having to lie to their parents. It is also possible that keeping this privileged knowledge a secret from parents, places heterosexual children at odds with family values and puts at risk their relationships with parents and other family members. For some of the participants in my research, this burdened position was not only occupied by their siblings, but often by other family members as well. For example, looking at the Campbell siblings, Marshall and Audrey's account evokes the collective family strain of having to keep Marshall's sexuality hidden from certain family members.

The impact now though is that it's strained at home, in that my dad doesn't know. We can talk about his boyfriend Joseph and general issues, but it can't be discussed openly. I've come to live with it now I suppose, but I wish I didn't have too (Audrey Diary Week Four)

In her diary, Audrey noted the difficulties of having to filter the things she could say openly within the family and of juggling social occasions between her parents, and her brother and his partner. The pressure to regulate what was said and to maintain the heterosexual façade, caused a certain amount of stress and anxiety for Audrey, much like the difficulties expressed by Marshall and Dragon earlier in this section. In her interview, Audrey talked at length about her desire for her brother to come out, not only because she felt this would lift the burden of secrecy for herself and her mother but because she

felt that her brother would also be happier if he could be himself. In his interview, Audrey's brother, Marshall also highlighted some of the troubles that he felt their mother must have experienced in keeping his secret for a long period of time.

It must be difficult and I do feel very sorry for [mum], because it must be a hell of a burden. It must be awful and in some ways I regret coming out to her, because they say that ignorance is bliss. I think it would have been better for her to not know and you know, be happy, than to know and have this sort of awful secret, sort of this skeleton in the cupboard that we have got now, but you know I have said it now, it is a bit late and I can't really go back on my word (Marshall)

Marshall's powerful extract sheds light on the burden that he felt his mother carried in choosing to hide the knowledge of his sexuality from her husband. This was something Marshall felt created a fracture in the foundations of their intimacy as a family, which made his mother very unhappy. Marshall expressed his regret at having been honest with his mother, wishing he had shielded her from keeping her own secrets and lies.

Existing research has shown that choosing to remain in the closet can have serious consequences for LGB individuals. What I have shown in this section, is that being required to stay in the closet by parents, can not only have negative impacts for the mental and physical well-being of LGB individuals, but it can also have detrimental implications for the relationships between parents and their children.

## **Conclusion**

One of the aims of this thesis was to move beyond the more well rehearsed parent-child stories of disclosure to account for the experiences of siblings. However, by redirecting the research gaze to sibling it became increasingly clear that some parents occupied a central role in the processes of disclosure. In families where parents held homophobic or hostile attitudes towards LGB sexualities, parents appeared to regulate, block, or delay the coming out experience by placing pressure on their LGB children to silence and conceal their identities from their heterosexual brothers and sisters. The regulation of these sexual secrets performed vital functions for families. Not only were these secrets justified as a way of 'protecting' young children from the knowledge and 'threat' of non-heterosexuality but they also served to maintain the heteronormative values instilled in these families.

By resituating the sibling coming out experience in wider family networks, many issues were revealed in this chapter, including those of secrecy, deception, and 'passing'<sup>45</sup>. It also drew attention to notions of family compliance, commitments and belonging. Analysis revealed that many participants self-regulated their behaviours to comply with their parents' wishes to hide their sexuality, despite the difficulties of doing this in the context of sibling and wider family relationships. This compliance tells us that the participants were committed to doing 'the right thing' in their families, and wanted to maintain family connections that were important and meaningful to them. These findings give an insight into some of the complexities of secrecy and silence in negotiating LGB sexualities with the obligations and responsibilities that come with family life. They also point to some of the tensions between being an individual who is free to pursue of their own choices, to being one of a collective unit.

The stories told in this chapter have also shed light on how harbouring sexual secrets, and the task of regulating LGB sexualities in the context of sibling relationships can have serious implications for LGB individuals, their families, and the relational connections they have with one another. A story like Ellen's, for example reveals the difficulty and stress of maintaining geographical and emotional boundaries between different identities in different place and times (see also Valentine 1993a; 1993b). The accounts of Audrey and Marshall also show how 'obstacles to openness' (Nordquist and Smart 2014) from parents can cause stress and tension in whole family networks when certain family members are excluded from the knowledge of disclosure. Yet, despite the considerable difficulties and consequences of regulating non-sexualities in the family, this chapter has also suggested that the LGB participants were still entrenched in their families of origin, making ongoing commitments to sustain relationships with their parents and siblings. It is possible to surmise that these family commitments emphasise the continued importance and reliance (Bengtson *et al.*, 2002) of families, even against the backdrop of hostility and crisis.

What I have revealed in this chapter is that the lives of siblings and parents are inextricably meshed in webs of complex family connections, meaning that the sibling coming out experience is highly relational. Departing from traditional understandings of disclosure as an autonomous and free decision made by individuals, in this chapter I have built upon Valentine's *et al*'s (2003) argument to show how the decisions that drive the sibling coming out process were often not made by individual desires alone,

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<sup>45</sup> According to Goffman (1963) passing is where individuals with a stigma that is not known about or not visually recognisable (such as LGB sexuality) can 'pass' in everyday life as someone 'normal'.

but were tied up in complex understandings of wider family responsibilities, obligations and commitments. This meant that Dragon, Louis, Tara and Ellen, for example, did not come out to all or some of their siblings, due to their desire to remain active members of their families of origin. This chapter, then, has pointed towards a need for scholars to move beyond a focus on individuals or the collective family unit (Valentine *et al.*, 2003) to situate the coming out process in wider intergenerational family networks and the relationships between these members (Nordquist and Smart 2014). I argue that it is only when these relational connections are accounted for, that we can begin to gain a better understanding of the coming out process between siblings and a clearer picture of how non-heterosexuality actually functions within these relationships and wider family dynamics.

The next chapter narrows the analytic lens on the family and focuses more specifically upon the experience of coming out to siblings. Through the unique gaze of LGB and heterosexual brothers and sisters, I look at some of the ways in which LGB sexualities are managed, expressed, and initially reacted too within sibling connections.

## Chapter Five

### ***'I have something to say': The Sibling Coming Out Story***

It is the early 2000s and Jen is a young woman in her first year of university. She meets a girl called Jackie and they become fast friends. One night they go to a party, they get drunk and they kiss. In that moment, Jen realises that she might be a lesbian. Jen is excited, finally experiencing that connection and spark that has been missing from the relationships she has had with boys in the past, but she is also scared and confused about how she feels. Jen grew up in a conservative environment where non-heterosexuality was unseen and unspoken about, so she has very little knowledge of what it means to be a lesbian. Jen is terrified at the prospect of having to come out to her parents, not knowing how they will react or what they will do. For a while, Jen keeps quiet, too afraid to tell anyone. She feels alone with no one to talk to. When the relationship with Jackie becomes complicated and Jen gets hurt, she turns to her older sister, Lauren for support. Late one night, Jen calls Lauren and comes out to her, telling her everything about her attraction to women and her relationship with Jackie. Lauren is not surprised about Jen's sexuality, and she is happy for her. They talk at length, laughing and joking about Jen no longer being Lauren's competition in securing a nice boyfriend. Jen discusses her fears about coming out to their parents and other family members and Lauren offers advice and reassurance that they will still love her. Jen feels lucky that her sister reacts in this way.

### **Introduction**

In many ways, Jen's account is representative of traditional coming out stories. She finds her new-found lesbian sexuality, coupled with the prospect of having to come out to her parents, daunting and risky. Like many existing coming out stories, Jen's account draws on the narrative of disclosure as 'frequently painful' and treacherous for her relationships with her parents (Plummer 1995 p.84). Yet unlike traditional coming out stories, she highlights the significance of her sibling relationship in her experience of disclosure. Jen indicates that her sister was the first person in the family that she told about her sexuality, not only because she trusted her to keep her secret, but also because she felt her sister would accept and support her. Jen's story then, raises questions about the negative discourse



that has shaped stories of coming out to, and within families and the place of siblings in these experiences. These are two issues that are addressed in this chapter.

In the previous chapter, I mapped the ways in which parents sought to block disclosure between siblings and the impact that this had upon family relationships. Drawing upon the stories of my LGB participants and their heterosexual siblings, this chapter looks more closely at the actual experience of coming out to siblings. The first section focuses upon the stories of the LGB participants, and the significance of their sibling relationships in experiences of disclosure. I explore how important it was for the majority of the LGB participants to come out to their brothers and sisters and how they felt about the prospect of disclosing. I indicate that, for many LGBs, their heterosexual siblings were the first family members that they came out to, and they became allies or important sources of support in disclosing to others. I then consider some of the strategies that the LGB participants developed for managing the coming out process, including different methods of disclosure and the implications these had for sibling connections. In the second section, I document the affective reactions of my heterosexual participants when initially learning that they had an LGB brother or sister. I indicate that disclosure is complex and can evoke a range of simultaneous and sometimes contradictory reactions, including happiness, joy, acceptance, as well as shock, anger and disappointment. In this chapter I argue that by shifting the gaze to the relational connections between siblings new and more diverse stories can be told about the experience of coming out within families.

### **Section One: The Significance of Coming Out to Siblings**

As illustrated in chapter two, a multi-disciplinary approach to the study of siblings has revealed how important these family ties are. Research suggests that most Western individuals (80-90 per cent) have sibling relationships and that these connections are unique in their frequency (Sanders 2004), duration (Cicirelli 1995), and potency (Dunn and Kendrick 1982; Klett-Davies 2008; Tannen 2008). It is understood that how the sibling relationship is routinely experienced, matters to the people who live it. It therefore stands to reason that the process of coming out, often described as the most significant event in the lives of LGBs (Davies 1992), might also be meaningful in sibling relationships. With a focus upon the stories of the LGB participants who came out to their siblings (before or after they disclosed to parents), this section considers the role and importance of heterosexual siblings in processes of disclosure. This includes exploring who was out to their siblings, how participants felt about the prospect of coming out and the different methods of disclosure.

## *Patterns of Disclosure*

The participant accounts revealed that almost all of the LGB individuals (18 out of 19) had come out to at least one, if not all of their heterosexual brothers and sisters. Given that I recruited participants upon the basis of having an experience with sibling disclosure, this figure is not surprising. It does however correlate with existing research, which suggests that LGB individuals frequently disclose their sexuality to their heterosexual siblings. Toomey and Richardson (2009), for example indicate that 75 per cent of their participants (n=56) had come out to their brothers and sisters. Savin-Williams (1998) also presents similar findings when reviewing coming out experiences from two college samples and three urban studies, with 40-50% of the adolescents having reported coming out to their siblings. When exploring my participant patterns of disclosure analysis revealed interesting gender dimensions. Similar to findings reported by Toomey and Richardson (2009), five of the female participants (who had both brothers and sisters) recalled coming out to their sisters before their brothers. Simon was the only participant with mixed gender heterosexual siblings who reported discussing his sexuality with his brother before his sister<sup>46</sup>. With the exclusion of Simon, the participants appeared to be out to their brothers as much as their sisters.

A number of participants revealed that they came out to their siblings before their parents or other family members. It is important to explore the role of siblings in first disclosures as the previous chapter indicated that partial disclosures in families, sharing knowledge with some and excluding others, can impact upon the relational connections between family members. Out of the 18 LGB participants (who have come out), seven revealed that they had disclosed to a heterosexual sibling first, as illustrated in the following quotations by Miss G, Holly and Jen.

I told my sister when I was, I don't know if it was when I was 16 or 18, but I have to say that she was quite supportive. I think she kind of knew already, sisters know, I think it is just one of those things really (Miss G)

I came out to my sister; she was the first person in my family that I came out to (Holly)

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<sup>46</sup> At the time of the interview Simon still had not come out to his sister. Interestingly though, when I met Simon for his debrief five weeks after the interview, he revealed that he had since come out to his parents and his sister

My sister kind of helped me [come out to my family], because she was actually the second or third person that I told (Jen)

In her Sibling Sticker Chart Rebecca noted the affective experience of coming out to her sister first and how she responded supportively and acceptingly (as explored in more detail in section two). Using a positive emoticon Rebecca charts the joy of being able to talk to and confide in her sister about her sexuality and how this was meaningful in the context of their bond.



*Figure 5.1 Rebecca – During Coming Out*

Holly, Jen, and Rebecca were not explicit in their reasons for disclosing to their sisters first, yet it became apparent that Jen, for example, sought the support of her sister in helping to come out to other family members - 'My sister helped me [come out to my family]'. Existing research has suggested that young LGB individuals may come out to their siblings first because they perceive them to be more supportive and accepting than their parents (Savin-Williams 1998). When we reconceptualise the family as a set of practices that people 'do' (Morgan 1996; 1999; 2011), maintained through processes of care and affect (Gabb 2008), it is also possible to interpret these first disclosures to sisters as examples of practices of intimacy. Jamieson (2011) defines these as 'practices which enable, generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other' (p. 1). Holly, Jen and Rebecca all talked of the close connections they had with their sisters prior to coming out. Disclosure, then, could represent a way of sustaining and building upon the quality of their close connections through sharing intimate and secret knowledge, spending quality time with one another, and expressing affection (Jamieson 1998; 2011). Sibling intimacy – 'the quality of close connection[s] between people

and the process of building this quality' (Jamieson 2011 p. 1) could thus be an important consideration in disclosure decisions. Ten (of the eighteen) LGB participants constructed their sibling relationships as 'close' or 'very close' prior to the coming out process. Participant accounts were peppered with heartfelt stories of play; 'I was closer to my sister and we used to play dolls and stuff together' (Monkey) and support; 'we both supported each other without question, without discussion' (Miss G), demonstrating the strength of their intimate connections. Experiences of intimacy were also frequently mapped in the Sibling Sticker Charts. When referring to sibling relationships during childhood and adolescent (prior to coming out), these participants used positive emoticons to illustrate their close sibling connections. Monkey demonstrated this by using positive stickers to show how she interpreted her sibling experiences of play, and 'ganging' up on her older brother as examples of togetherness and belonging that she felt in the connection with her sister (Ribbens-McCarthy 2012).

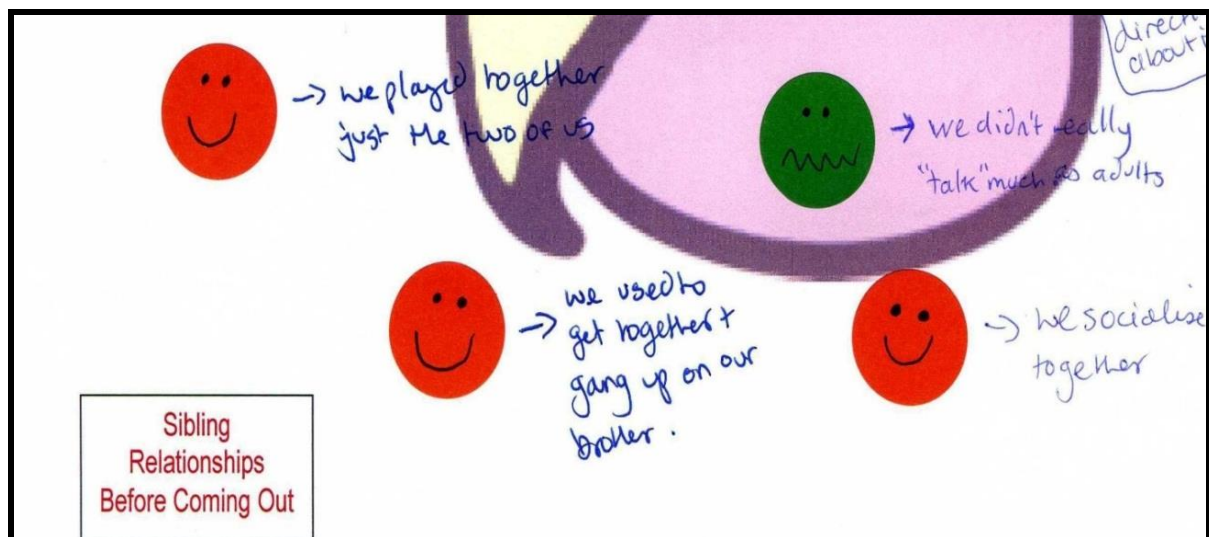


Figure 5.2 Monkey – Before Coming Out

### *Coming Out Considerations*

Many LGB participants indicated that the process of disclosure was meaningful, insomuch as it was often a calculated decision. For most, disclosure was not a spur of the moment decision but was rather a process that had been carefully considered in relation to anxieties and desires about coming out (or not coming out).

Some LGB participants recalled having strong feelings about the prospect of coming out to their siblings prior to the event. Reflecting similar anxieties about how their families might react, a small minority of participants in this research articulated concerns that disclosure could put relationships with

their brothers or sisters at risk. Retrospectively, Monkey and Angel-Paul, discussed fears they had about how their siblings were going to react and the effects of disclosure on their sibling bonds. Monkey and Angel-Paul legitimated their concerns about rejection based on the anti-gay rhetoric their siblings had used in the past.

My brother was the worst one I was worried about telling, cos my brother, when he was growing up he was quite homophobic um... So I was scared of telling him because I heard him going on about gay this, queers that and all the normal stuff you hear (Angel-Paul)

As this extract suggests, for Angel-Paul it was not telling his mother or father that worried him, but rather his 'homophobic' older brother. Angel-Paul perceived his brother to be homophobic based upon his explicit verbal hostility towards gay men, demonstrated through his frequent use of heterosexual/homophobic language, such as 'poof', 'bender', 'shirt lifter', and 'queer', and the telling of anti-gay jokes. Research on subtle forms of sexual minority prejudice, suggests that the use of similar kinds of heterosexual/homophobic language serves to remind LGB individuals of their lower social status and to indicate that they are unwelcome or perceived as abnormal within particular social settings (Herek 2002)<sup>47</sup>. The homophobic attitudes of his brother led Angel-Paul to believe that he would not accept his sexuality and that coming out would create a crisis in their sibling relationship. Monkey similarly recalled some of the concerns she had about coming out to her sister:

I had worked myself up to think that she would react really really badly because like before when I had been with [my sister] and we had seen gay people on the TV or something, she would be like saying loads of negative things. She wasn't, she is not the most you know, pc (i.e. politically correct) person in the world when it comes to gays. So she is, I was afraid that she would react badly or think I was a dyke or something (Monkey)

Prior to disclosure, Monkey's sister had openly expressed negative views towards LGBs, particularly those portrayed in the mainstream media. Monkey therefore felt her sister would react badly to her lesbian sexuality, and assume her to be a 'dyke'. It is important to acknowledge that the use of the term

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<sup>47</sup> See, for example, the expansive collection of research on the use of homophobic language in schools, colleges and universities and how language can be used to stigmatise sexual and gender identities, and the implications this can have on young people. See, for example, Epstein 1994; Epstein and Johnson 1998; Nayak and Kehily 1996 and Thurlow 2001.

'dyke' can shift and change; once commonly used to refer to radical lesbian feminists or in America, a masculine woman. The use of 'dyke' in this context suggests that it represents a powerful distance from traditional hetero-feminine behaviours.

Despite the unpleasant and hurtful views that their siblings displayed about non-heterosexuality, both Angel-Paul and Monkey strove to keep their sibling relationships alive, because they were connections that mattered to them. Indeed, concerns about how their siblings would react arose from fears of jeopardising Angel-Paul's and Monkey's previously close sibling relationships.

Monkey constructed her relational connection to her sister through notions of sameness, belonging, care and activity (Edwards *et al.*, 2006; Ribbens McCarthy 2012). She described how she was 'very similar' to her sister, how they always had the 'same opinions' on issues and how they wanted to explore the 'same places' together. Monkey emphasised the importance of spending quality time with her sister, talking about things that were going on in their lives, and providing mutual emotional support. Angel-Paul similarly described his childhood relationship with his brother as 'always really close'. While he acknowledged that they could be 'jealous' of each other, Angel-Paul talked extensively about the ways his older brother cared, supported and 'looked out' for him throughout his life. This sense of togetherness and belonging was important and extremely meaningful for Angel-Paul. Both Angel-Paul and Monkey wanted to maintain these important relationships, but they also understood that coming out in the context of these relationships was risky due to the values held by their siblings, much likened to those described in model two in the previous chapter.

In contrast to Monkey and Angel-Paul, a number of LGB participants portrayed a more positive outlook on the prospect of coming out to their siblings. Some indicated that they were not concerned about disclosing to their brothers or sisters. Even though Jen recalled being worried about coming out to her parents, as demonstrated in the opening vignette to this chapter, she talked of having few concerns about her brother's reaction. Jen contextualised her lack of concern in relation to the social context in which her brother had been raised with her brother. Being born almost a decade later, Jen reflected upon the significant social changes that have occurred during this time, which have impacted upon the lives of, and attitudes towards, LGB individuals. Jen alludes to the types of changes Weeks (2007) describes, such as the repeal of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988<sup>48</sup>, the passing of anti-discrimination legislation for LGBT people in employment, the Civil Partnership Act 2004 and the

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<sup>48</sup> Section 28 was introduced as an amendment to the Local Government Act 1988, which prevented local authorities in England and Wales from 'promoting' 'homosexuality', and depicted 'homosexual' families as 'pretend'.

Adoption and Children's Act 2002 and how these changes have created increasingly liberal attitudes towards LGBT lives in contemporary Western society. In light of the liberal social and cultural context in which her brother grew up, Jen assumed that he would not hold negative views about her sexuality: 'I didn't really think he would care'. Georgina similarly described having little worry about coming out to her parents and siblings as she felt her family bonds were unbreakable:

I think I was more worried about telling my friends than I was telling my family  
[Sarah: Mmm, why?] I don't know why, because you are always going to have your  
family aren't you. Whereas you choose your friends (Georgina)

Here Georgina evokes powerful relational motifs of family togetherness and belonging, much like that described by Ribbens-McCarthy (2012) in her study of how the family is understood in people's ordinary lives. Ribbens-McCarthy (2012) suggests that for many people the family symbolises 'a supportive unit stretching backwards and forwards in time, providing a sense of belonging and care, and evoking deep emotions' (p. 75-76). Georgina talked of the importance of her identity as 'the protector, the mummy', of the heartfelt memories she had of playing with her brothers when they were children; 'we used to get up first thing in the morning, pack lunch and go out on a bike ride and we wouldn't come back till it was dark' and of 'work[ing] very hard at being a family unit'. Central to Georgina's family stories was the sense of togetherness, closeness and security she felt in these relationships. For Georgina, these close family relationships were grounds for anticipating acceptance and support for her lesbian sexuality from her parents and brothers.

Jen's and Georgina's stories run counter to the normative accounts of anxiety and fear that are associated with the coming out experience in families (Ben-Ari 1995; Herdt and Boxer 1993). What these findings suggest is that disclosing to sibling may be less worrisome and anxiety provoking than coming out to parents.

### *Methods for Disclosure*

Many of my participants also discussed the different strategies that they used for actually coming out to their siblings. For most, disclosure was constructed as an important moment, which had to be done at the right time, in the right way and through the right methods. As Molly demonstrated in her interview: 'I had been planning [coming out] in my head, how am I going to tell [my siblings]? How am I going to tell

them?’ Like Molly, some LGB participants indicated that considerable thought was put into choosing an appropriate method for disclosing their sexualities. This included direct methods such as face-to-face or telephone conversations, or indirect methods like online social networking sites or through another person. Decisions about coming out appeared to be influenced by geographic distance between siblings, thoughts about how heterosexual brothers and sisters would react, as well as spur of the moment opportunities. I suggest that it is important to consider these disclosure methods, as how the LGB participants came out appeared to impact upon their sibling connections, at times causing tension or uncertainty in their relationships.

LGB participants told rich, detailed and sometimes humorous stories about how they came out to their siblings. Many of my LGB participants indicated that they chose to disclose directly by talking to their siblings face-to-face (see also Rossi 2010). However, those who were not able (because of geographic separation) to come out to their siblings in person, or did not want to do so, talked about the tension that arose in their sibling connections. Monkey, for example described coming out to her sister over the phone as she lived very far away and only visited Monkey once or twice a year:

I called her, I rang her and said ‘I have got something to tell you’, (laughing) and cried and cried and um she was alright actually. She was like ‘oh well I always knew something was up’, um and said and kind of said ‘aw well don’t worry about it and I am glad you have told me (Monkey)

As indicated earlier, Monkey was very concerned about coming out as she thought her sister ‘would react badly’. Here Monkey indicates that her sister already had some suspicions about her sexuality, and that her sister was actually accepting when Monkey did tell her she was a lesbian. Monkey did, however, draw attention to some of the tension she felt with regard to her sister because she had come out over the phone, rather than face-to-face:

I think at first it was a bit more strained because when I first saw her, because like I came out to her over the phone so when I first saw her afterwards it was a bit tense, because I wasn’t really sure how she was going to be with me (Monkey)



Monkey's unease seems to reflect a sense that her sister could have hidden her true feelings about Monkey's sexuality over the phone, in a way that she would possibly not have been able to do in person.

There were also strong themes of tension in the stories told about coming out online. The rise of the internet has arguably changed the nature of the way people communicate with one another, demonstrated for example, by the proliferation of social networking sites, alongside email facilities, message boards, and instant messaging. The internet has been argued to hold particular significance for young LGBT people for whom practices of regulation and exclusion are present in almost every arena of their public and private life (Hillier and Harrison 2007), especially in rural areas (Gray 2009). For these young LGBT people, the internet can be an emotional lifeline for information and communication about their sexuality (Stein 2003; Woodland 1999) and can provide the possibility of creating alternative lifestyles and building new forms of culture and communities (Hillier and Harrison 2007). The internet has also been said to be an important place for LGBT people to understand, develop and perform their sexual identities (Gray 2009; Harper *et al.*, 2009).

Some of the participants in my research indicated that the internet played an important role in the development and exploration of their own sexualities. Tara, for example discussed how she used the internet as a safe space to articulate her sexuality with strangers when she first realised she might be a lesbian:

I have always been quite like an online personality, so when I was online I would um, I don't know how I even found people, I can't remember now, but um chatting to a couple of like, it was gay guys actually who I spoke to first online and was telling them about [my sexuality] and stuff and I remember it being kind of like a big deal to admit it online. I was like 'oh I can't believe I am typing this', kind of thing (Tara)

In his account, Andy also framed the internet as an exciting place of liberation for his sexual identity that he had kept hidden from his family. As similarly suggested by Harper *et al* (2009), for Andy the internet helped him to understand more about his sexuality and his acceptance of who he was, as well as being a place to meet likeminded people.

I started looking for people with similar feelings...it was a coming out process to myself...I was excited, exhilarated, reassured that there were people that felt similarly um and that wanted contact with me (Andy)

For other participants, like Simon and Jason, the internet provided an opportunity to reveal their sexuality to their close friends and family. The growth in social networking and social media sites, such as MySpace and Facebook has been said to provide an exciting opportunity for self-expression, especially among young people (Livingstone 2008). Murthy (2012) suggests that social media, like Twitter for example, enables users to get to know people on a more multi-dimensional level, as they become more acquainted to the central, or what Goffman (1959) termed 'backstage' aspects of people's everyday lives and identities, including sexuality. Some participants in my research used Facebook as a platform for disclosing sexual identities to others; 'in terms of my actively coming out, it was done via the medium of Facebook. How very modern of me' (Simon). Some of the participants who came out online talked about it being a more convenient and less intrusive method for revealing their sexuality to people they knew. Although perhaps more convenient for LGBs, coming out online also brought with it a number of risks and tensions for the sibling relationship. When looking at the stories of heterosexual siblings who discovered that they had an LGB brother or sister via the means of social networking sites, it is possible to see how siblings can be hurt by the impersonal nature of this method. K. Hepburn, for example recalled feeling disappointed that she initially found out that her brother was gay on his Facebook page:

I was just on Facebook and getting used to it and mingling around just looking at people and [my brother] popped up so I just started looking at his profile and started going on the wall and you know just having a good old nose and then I went to the 'about me' or whatever it is, details thing and it just said interested in and it had men and I was like 'oh my god, oh right okay' (K. Hepburn)

I was kind of thinking that is kind of really mean that I just found out that way. Like cos I thought, what about all of your other friends that you have got on Facebook that, that and obviously know you, that knew already, before me, before I did. Also like my best friend at the time was on Facebook before I was. So then I was thinking well did she know before me? And if she did that's horrible cos she didn't

tell me obviously. Um and that kind of got me down that just other people, that might not be as key to the family as I am, knew before me (K. Hepburn)

There is a lot going on this account. Although K. Hepburn talked of feeling 'sad' and 'hurt' that she had discovered her brother was gay online rather than through a face-to-face conversation because she felt 'it was a bit impersonal', most of her disappointment appeared to come from feelings of exclusion or unimportance in her role as a sister. K. Hepburn constructed her family as intimate, 'our family is really close'. She gave many examples practices of intimacy, – 'practices which enable, generate and sustain a sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other' (Jamieson 2011 p. 1). This included frequent and large family gatherings, family holidays, day-to-day interactions and sharing important aspects of their lives through talk. For K. Hepburn these practices were essential to her understanding of good and close family relationships. As an important person in her brother's life, K. Hepburn felt that he should have told her before other, less important people (i.e. those that were not biologically connected with him). She felt she should have been 'at the front of the queue' when her brother was thinking of coming out, because she saw sharing secrets and important information as a marker of her close and intimate relations (Smart 2007). It hurt K. Hepburn to find out her brother was gay via Facebook as it appeared to demonstrate a lack of sibling closeness that was so important and meaningful to her.

Holmes (2011) suggest that being 'friends' with people on social networking sites can be tricky. This she indicates is particularly so as new technology brings with it new manners or what she calls proper 'netiquettes' (p. 2) that should be followed in order to maintain and manage online 'friendships'. Some of the participants in this research identified social networking (Facebook) as a particularly risky platform for revealing sexualities they were attempting to hide from certain family members. Jen, for example suggested that Facebook can inadvertently 'out' people's sexuality or relationships. She talked about her own experience of having her sexuality questioned by her friends after she had been tagged<sup>49</sup> in other people photographs with a woman she had started dating:

I think social networking 'outs' people now... you can't stay in the closet if you have Facebook, I swear to god. So I got all these messages like 'why are you kissing that girl?' (laughing) (Jen)

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<sup>49</sup> A tag links a person to something that is posted, like a photograph or activity. I.e. you can tag a photo to label who is in the picture and what they are doing. When someone is tagged, this will appear on their profile page and their Facebook friends are able to see this, unless the user has altered their privacy settings.

Although social networking maybe a popular way for young people to express their individual identities (Miller 1998), for LGBs who have not yet come out, Facebook could thus also be a site that they had to regulate and monitor in order to prevent their sexuality from 'leaking'. Participants talked about the way they carefully crafted and managed the information they shared with certain people through the use of 'open' (where Facebook friends can see all the information, posts, and photographs on your profile page) and 'private' (where information is restricted) profile pages. This was something Jason referred to as a 'concentric ring of privacy', where some of his friends could see everything (including his sexuality) on his profile and others barely his basic posts and details. Jen described this process of managing her sexuality online:

I have to fiddle about with my privacy settings now because obviously my grandmother is on Facebook, my aunts, who are like ranging conservatives and I am like oh god I don't want them to see you know, like half the photos. So I have to be like, you can't write on my wall, you can't see anything, you know? We can be friends but you can't even talk to me (Jen)

These findings suggest that in the age of new information technology, the internet offers opportunities to express non-heterosexual identities to family members in new ways. However, as indicated by K. Hepburn, Jason and Jen, coming out online is not without its consequences or complications. Indeed, being out in these spaces often requires a heightened sense of monitoring and regulation to prevent their sexualities from being leaked to those they are hiding from.

The significance of coming out to siblings and the way they did this was further amplified in stories where disclosure to siblings had been made by another person. Some participants experienced difficulties, not feeling able to come out to their siblings themselves. In chapter four, I indicated that Louis was one of the participants who had regulated his sexuality and kept it a secret from his brothers at his mother's request. He also talked at length about how his mother had eventually disclosed his sexuality to his brothers herself without his permission. Louis felt that not coming out to his siblings himself impacted upon their relationships:

One of the most significant things that, I feel, affected myself and my relationships with my siblings was the fact that I didn't come out. My mum came out for me, and

not because I asked her to, but rather because she felt that it would be 'more conducive to the family' if she did it for me. This was quite annoying and frustrating. (Louis)

Valentine *et al* (2003) suggest that it is common for mothers to reveal the sexualities of their children to other family members, either at the request of their child, or because they need support in dealing with feelings of shock, fear, or disappointment. However, as demonstrated by Louis, when parents assume the responsibility of coming out for a child, it can have implications for LGB individuals and the relationships that they have with their siblings. In his sibling sticker chart, Louis mapped a range of challenging (blue sticker) and negative (yellow sticker) emotions to illustrate the difficulty of this experience with one of his brothers.

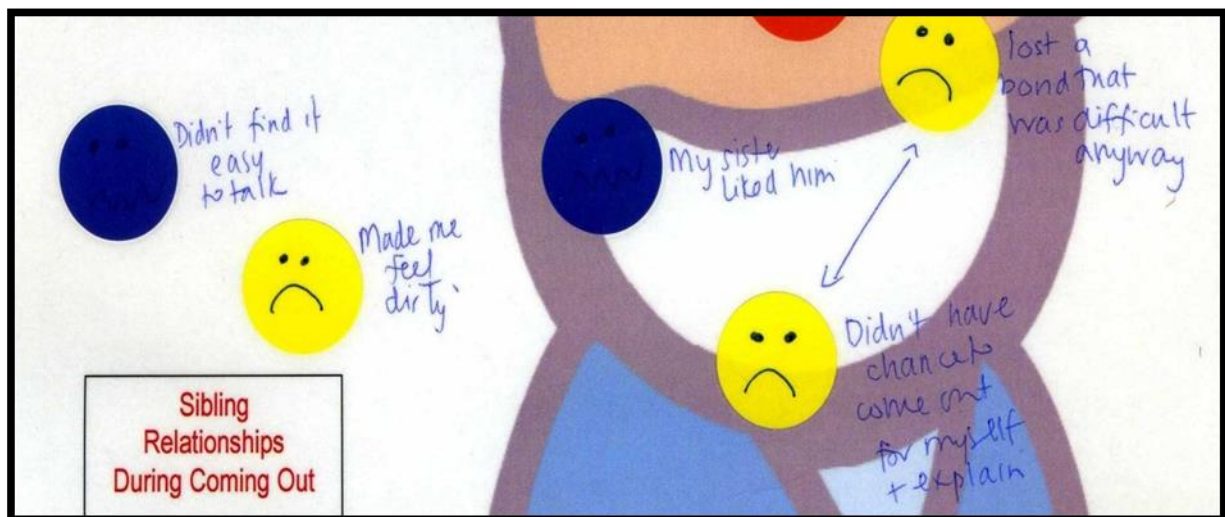


Figure 5.3 Louis – During Coming Out

While it is clear from this visual picture that Louis had always had a complicated and difficult relationship with his brother, he also recalled experiencing powerful emotions of regret, disappointment, and loss at not being able to come out to him in person.

Sometimes I regret that my mum stole my moment, I suppose because I wasn't there to see how [my brothers] reacted...I think it took away a significant moment to bond (Louis)

Given that self-disclosure is framed as of momentous importance in the lived experiences of LGBs (Davies 1992), it is not surprising that Louis felt disappointed when his coming out moment was 'stolen' from him. Louis discussed the discontent he felt at not being able to decide when and how he came out to his brothers and not being there to see how they reacted to his sexuality. The coming out process was also significant for Louis, as he had romanticised or imagined it as a way of creating better, closer, and more intimate relationships with his brothers, a sentiment which is echoed in the coming out literature (Ben-Ari 1995; Herek 1996). The 'opportunity to bond' with his brothers through disclosure was perhaps important, as Louis talked extensively of the hostile relationships they had with one another while they were growing up, how they argued and fought, how they were unable to relate, and how he was threatened by their 'hyper-masculinity'. For Louis, coming out, therefore represented an opportunity to create new relationships with his brothers.

In this first half of this chapter, I have argued that coming out to siblings was an important and meaningful process for the majority of participants. However, it must also be recognised that, for some LGB participants, disclosure appeared to hold less significance than is signalled in the coming out literature (Davies 1992; Plummer 1995). A small number of LGB participants depicted the coming out process as relatively unremarkable in the context of their sibling relationships. Jason, for example, indicated that he had not constructed disclosure to his sister as a particularly important or meaningful task:

Yeah it was just one of those things, there wasn't a particular cue, apart from this terrible relationship, but apart from that there wasn't any, oh maybe I should you know, milestones to sort of tick off to say 'broach subject with sister'. It wasn't anything like that, it was just one of those things I mentioned in passing (Jason)

Similarly, Angie talked about 'forgetting' to come out to her sister, assuming that she already knew about her sexuality:

I am out to my sister, but I never actually officially came out to her. I kind of forgot (laughing) [Sarah: Opps (laughing)]. Well I didn't really realise I hadn't come out to her. It was one of those things where I just assumed I had. I just assumed that she would know (Angie)

In framing disclosure as 'just one of those things' that arose in the context of a routine, everyday conversation with siblings, or as something that was assumed to be already known, Jason and Angie signal the ordinary and unremarkable nature of coming out. Jason indicated he had not spent a great deal of time thinking about, or strategising the process of coming out, and he had not constructed disclosure as of momentous importance to him, nor to his connection with his sister. In a family that were not very good at keeping secrets, Angie also assumed that her sister would have been told by her parents, and felt very little need to discuss her sexuality with her sister herself.

## **Section Two: Sibling Reactions**

The first half of this chapter considered the different strategies that LGB participants had for disclosing sexual intimacy to their siblings. The focus of this section is on the wide spectrum of emotions that heterosexual siblings experienced during the announcement or discovery of their brother or sister's LGB sexuality. The emphasis is upon the initial reactions of siblings, rather than the long-term implications for coming out, which is explored in chapter six. Drawing upon data from the interviews, diaries, and sibling sticker charts, this chapter focuses mostly upon the stories told by the heterosexual participants, like Fred, Anne, Charlotte and K. Hepburn (although LGB accounts also feature here).

The study of emotions has been the site of some contention for social science scholars, particularly as emotions have been argued to operate on many different levels of reality, including biological, neurological, cultural, structural and situational (Turner 2009). Emotions have also been point of tension with the sociological study of intimacy and family life. Smart (2007 p. 53) for example, draws attention to the failure of family studies to pay sufficient attention to the ways in which personal relationships are 'saturated with emotions, feelings and affect'. However, sociology has also witnessed an 'emotional turn' greatly influenced by feminists. There is now a substantial and important tradition within the discipline that engages with emotions and the role they play in shaping the social world and social relationships (Weeks 2009). Within this body of work it is argued that personal and social relations generate strong emotions like love, hope, despair and loss, emotions which Weeks (2009) argues are 'critical to the ways we live our lives, but often so intangible and elusive that they can easily escape the research process' (p. 5). These theorists suggest that emotions do not arise from the 'self-contained individual but are produced and given meaning in a socio-cultural (or self-reflexive context)' (Smart 2007 p.58). Indeed, as Holmes (2010) suggests, 'emotions have become central to a subjectivity and sociality that is relationally constructed' (p. 139). This means that we cannot fully understand people's feelings or experiences of being in a world that relies on connections to others, without comprehending emotions

(Holmes 2010). Gabb (2011) suggests that by repositioning emotions at the very heart of family life, and by paying attention to emotional encounters in the family, we understand more about contemporary intimate living.

It is, therefore, important to pay attention to the emotions surrounding the coming out process. In this context, disclosure is important not only for LGBs, but is also meaningful, affective and life altering for those siblings who have been told. By looking at emotions through the lens of siblings, it is also possible to see how it is not just the revelation of an LGB sexuality that evokes powerful personal emotions, but rather how intimacy and sexuality are managed in families generates strong feelings about connections to other family members. Furthermore, this section demonstrates that the emotions experienced by heterosexual siblings when they discover that they have an LGB brother or sister are extremely complex and fluid. Unlike academic writings presenting a number of linear, and often negative, emotional stages that parents go through, including shock, denial, isolation, anger, depression, guilt, self-blame, rejection, and in some cases acceptance (Anderson 1987; Savin-Williams and Dube 1998), I argue that heterosexual siblings can experience a range of simultaneous, competing, and non-linear reactions when they learn that they have an LGB sibling. As demonstrated by Anne, for example, siblings can be shocked, happy, concerned, and excited for their LGB brothers or sisters and for themselves, all at the same time. I suggest that attention to these emotions counter the discourse of negativity and crisis that has become synonymous with the coming out experience in families. Instead, I argue that by shifting the research gaze to siblings we can see some of the subtle nuances in the family coming out story, and begin to account for stories of love, acceptance and support for LGB family members.

### *Acceptance, Happiness, and Indifference*

In contrast to stories of rejection and trouble that have been popular in narratives of parental reaction, the majority of heterosexual siblings in this study indicated that they initially responded to the disclosure of their siblings LGB identity in a positive way. As explored below, stories of acceptance, happiness, and indifference were common among the heterosexual participant accounts.

Reactions of acceptance featured heavily in the coming out stories told by both the LGB and heterosexual participants (see, also, D'Augelli *et al.*, 2008; D'Augelli *et al.*, 1998; Gorman-Murray 2008; Hilton and Szymanski 2011; Hilton and Szymanski 2014; Toomey and Richardson 2009). In relation to the disclosure of non-heterosexualities, acceptance has been defined as the 'approval of the act of



being self-affirmative' (Hilton and Szymanski 2014, p.166). According to Savin-Williams and Dube (1998) parental acceptance means that a child's LGB status is not a secret or a source of shame, that there is an absence of prejudicial attitudes towards their LGB child, and that parents disclose their child's sexuality to others. Many of the LGB participants in this research talked about how they were initially accepted by their siblings and how there was no attempt to encourage change or voice prejudicial attitudes. Sue, for example, noted that her brother had 'always been very accepting and supportive' of her lesbian sexuality. Georgina indicated that her younger brother, Daniel, 'accepted it without even having to talk about it', and Rebecca said that when she came out, all of her siblings were 'very accepting'. This sense of acceptance was also emphasised in the stories told by some of the heterosexual participants. Fred, for example, stated:

As I said, it was just acceptance, but I think we were brought up to very much accept people as they were...I think, I think all of the family, all four of us [siblings] didn't have any hang-ups about it at all right from the start (Fred)

As can be seen, Fred was brought up in a liberal environment, and his parents had worked very hard to create an ethos of inclusivity for all people, irrespective of their differences. Fred felt that being raised in such a way meant that he and his other siblings were able to accept his sister's lesbian sexuality without hesitation or any negative repercussions. These notions of acceptance were consistent with findings from emerging (albeit limited) research on the sibling experience of coming out. As noted in chapter two, research from D'Augelli *et al.*, (2008), Gorman-Murray (2008), and Hilton and Szymanski (2011; 2014), for example, demonstrates how heterosexual brothers and sisters can and do accept their LGB siblings. I suggest that reactions of happiness in stories of disclosure question and trouble the dominant discourse of crisis and disruption that have been entrenched in the normative ideas of coming out. What my participant accounts indicate is that heterosexual siblings can be pleased and content with having an LGB brother or sister.

Participants in this research offered many different illustrations of what they understood to be demonstrations of sibling acceptance. This included heterosexual siblings coming out to others (as the sibling of a LGB brother or sister) 'I have never hid it from friends. I have always been like 'yeah I have got a gay sister' and they think it is fucking awesome' (Charlotte). Articulating their explicit support for the rights of LGBs; 'Felicity will stick up for gay rights...I mean that means a lot to me' (Tara), and defending LGB siblings from anti-gay rhetoric in schools and workplaces; 'I was very open about it if

ever it, if a situation came up and there was a lot of anti-gay feel around...I would quite deliberately let it be known [that I had a gay sister]' (Tommy). One of the significant themes that appeared in many of the participant acceptance stories was the integration of same-sex partners into the family. This was particularly evident in Sue's research account. In her diary, Sue described how her female partner had been accepted into the family, and how their relationship had been normalised and treated the same as any heterosexual coupling:

My partner and I have been included in 'girls' days' and 'girls' weekends' and twice they came to stay at our house...The most recent was 4/5 weeks ago when we all stayed at one of my sister-in-laws and my sister-in-law moved out of her double bed and let me and my partner sleep in it together (Sue Diary Week Three)

Sue explained that she viewed this gesture as the ultimate illustration of acceptance of her sexuality and of the respect that her brother had for her lesbian relationship:

**Sue:** You know that to me was acceptance really. Having us sharing the same bed in the same you know

**Sarah:** They were able to accept you and Gina as a couple?

**Sue:** Yes, yes, yes and my brother and his wife, they gave up their bed for us to sleep in and they sort of made do with you know sort of odd mattresses and things. So it was, it was recognised as a genuine, you know sort of relationship and obviously one that was respected.

Heather, one of the heterosexual participants, described not only accepting and including her sister's female partner into the family, but she stressed how her sister's partner had become 'part of the family', a sister of choice (Weston 1991; Weeks *et al.*, 2001).

I met [my sister's girlfriend] and she has been like one of my sisters ever since [Sarah: You get on really well?] Yeah I love her, oh my god yeah. I would be so gutted if they ever broke up, for real...I want her to be in the family forever (Heather)

Here, Heather draws on the notion of a sister-like bond, evoking an image of their (hopefully life-long) relationship being characterised by love, care, reciprocity, fun, and everyday interaction.

That is not to say that all illustrations of sibling acceptance were so simple and clear cut. For example, Angel-Paul talked about how his older brother accepted him when he came out and how he did not attempt to change his sexuality. Yet Angel-Paul also felt that his brother had an underlying moral objection to LGB identities in general:

I know he accepts it. Um he still doesn't agree with it, but he has just accepted it and said 'okay this is who you are, I can't change that, you are my brother and that is how it is staying' (Angel-Paul)

As noted in the previous section, Angel-Paul's brother had previously exhibited his hostility towards LGBs and gay men in particular, though the use of homophobic language and jokes. Angel-Paul indicated that disclosing his sexuality did not appear to change his brother's views; he still used homophobic language and 'banter'; 'he does call me all of the joke names like bender or whatever'...'now he calls me his sister' (Angel-Paul). Yet in Angel-Paul's account there was a strong sense that irrespective of his brother's negative attitudes towards gay people, his brother accepted him and did not want Angel-Paul's sexuality to adversely affect the strong bond they had as brothers. Miss G also talked about how her sister was accepting and supportive of her sexuality, and her previous same-sex relationships, but felt that her sister did 'still have some issues' with her being a lesbian. Miss G felt this was evidenced by her sister choosing to keep her sexuality a secret from her boyfriend of eleven years, until the day they got married.

Within the boundaries of acceptance, a small number of heterosexual participants also described feeling strong emotions of joy and happiness when they learnt that they had an LGB brother or sister. Anne for example, recalled feeling happy and pleased when her sister came out to her:

I remember [my sister] being very excited...when she rang me and it just like this revelation that she'd um, she'd been with, she'd been with this woman and it was just like this awakening for her and she was just so happy and I was just so pleased for her (Anne)

I was very pleased for [my sister] as she clearly felt very excited about coming out herself. It was a bit like a butterfly spreading its wings...I was really really happy for her because I could see she was much happier in herself (Anne Diary Week Three)

Anne spoke of experiencing emotions of joy not just because her sister came out to her, but also because her sister appeared so fulfilled and excited by the realisation of her sexuality. Here, Anne draws on the powerful imagery of a 'butterfly spreading its wings', to symbolise the joy of seeing her sister metaphorically grow and freely embrace her new identity as a lesbian woman. The positive change in her sister was particularly emotive for Anne, as prior to coming out she felt that her sister was 'not content and not happy', evidenced by her struggle with depression and self-harm. Several of the other LGB participants also described their siblings as being happy and excited when they came out. Dragon, for example, indicated that his younger brother was 'so cool and so understanding and so happy' when he was eventually able to discuss his sexuality with him. Similar sibling responses of happiness and joy have also been noted by other scholars. Hilton and Szymanski (2011) draw on examples of heterosexual brothers and sisters feeling 'pleased' when their LGB sibling came out, especially when they discovered that their siblings had a partner they could trust and rely on, or 'happy' because their siblings had discovered who they were, and had shared this privileged information with them (p. 298).

Among the stories of acceptance, some of the LGB participants also recalled how their heterosexual siblings were completely 'unfazed' (Ellen), or had very little reaction to the disclosure of their sexuality. Jen, Dragon, and Jason illustrated this in their interviews:

We are driving and I was like 'hey Ryan um you know my friend', 'you know Cali, who my mum keeps referring to as my friend?' and he was like 'yeah' and I was like 'that's my, that's my girlfriend' (laughing) and he was like 'oh' and I was like 'yeah I am gay' and he was like 'okay' and then he was like 'can I borrow £5?'. [Sarah: laughing] You know he was really, like, he couldn't care less (Jen)

I think that if I had told my brother that if I had liked brown shoes he would have been more shocked, than knowing that I was gay. That was something that didn't really make any impact on him. It was like water off a duck's back (Dragon)

I just mentioned it to her and she didn't bat an eye lid, she was fine with it and that was it and since then it has been fine...yeah she doesn't really care (Jason)

In contrast to popular notions of disclosure creating havoc among the family, here, Jen, Dragon and Jason suggest that the discovery of their sexuality had little or no negative impact upon their siblings. They suggest that their brothers and sisters were not shocked, disappointed, hurt, or angry when they learnt that they had a gay or lesbian sibling. Rather they were accepting and supportive, and depicted disclosure as a non-event; something that was not particularly significant or life changing in terms of their sibling relationship. In her Sibling Sticker Chart, Jen used a positive emoticon to map how this response from her brother meant that nothing changed in their relationships and how meaningful this was.



Figure 5.4 Jen – During Coming Out

Jen and Dragon attribute their siblings' acceptance and nonchalant reactions to more liberal attitudes towards sex and sexuality, being part of a different and more progressive generation, and having diverse life experiences. As Jen articulates:

I think it is a really big testament to the generation of of people, because [my brother] is obviously almost a generation below me. I think it is like, when I came out to him, [it shows] how much people are growing up more with an open mind (Jen)

In her account, Jen hints at the importance of situating her brother's reaction to disclosure in a historical and cultural context. It is therefore useful to analyse Jen's story in light of some of the arguments put forward by Jeffery Weeks in *The World We Have Won* (2007). He suggests that the UK has witnessed quite radical cultural changes concerning sex and sexuality. He draws on examples of the introduction of equality legislation which has protected LGBT people from being discriminated against in employment or in the buying of goods and services, the repeal of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, as well as the equalisation the age of consent, and the introduction of civil partnerships. Weeks indicates that these changes have signalled great process in the integration of LGBT people as legitimate members of mainstream British society. He claims that these changes are reflected in the shift of social attitudes towards LGBT people, as demonstrated by British and Scottish social attitudes surveys. For example, data from the Scottish Social Attitudes survey suggests that discriminatory attitudes towards gay and lesbians have declined in Scotland and England between the period of 2000 and 2010. In England in 2000, 46% of people thought that same-sex relationships were 'always' or 'mostly wrong'. By 2010, that proportion had fallen to 29%. Scotland reported a similar story, with 49% of people depicting same-sex relationships as 'always' or 'mostly wrong' in 2000, and only 27% in 2010. In her extract, Jen suggests that her brother, as part of a younger generation, has witnessed these changes and they have impacted upon his liberal and accepting attitudes towards LGBs. Jen's story points to the importance of situating disclosure in historical contexts.

### *Feeling Lucky*

When analysing the reactions of happiness, acceptance and nonchalance it was interesting to note how some of the heterosexual and LGB participants framed these positive experience of disclosure in relation to luck or fortune. For example, in describing her sister's coming out experience Anne talked about how lucky her sister was to be accepted by their family:

Luckily for [my sister], we touched on it at the beginning of the interview, you know, some people don't get to speak with their family or their siblings after these types

of revelations, you know and, with [my sister] it's all been about acceptance really right from the word go (Anne)

Anne (as well as Sue and Jen) demonstrated an acute awareness of the negative perception of coming out in families (see, also, Gorman-Murray 2008). She articulated an understanding that coming out is 'a gamble and a risk' (Weston 1991 p.48) and positioned the experience of rejection as the most likely outcome of disclosure. In drawing upon the notion of luck, defined as 'events that are subject to chance' or as 'having good fortune' (Collins English Dictionary 2009 p. 440), Anne, Sue and Jen note the discrepancy between their own experiences and the normative accounts of coming out to families. This divergence was explicitly noted by Rebecca in her written diary:

I have been very aware while writing this diary that my experiences have not been typical of my generation and I would not want to imply that in [my generation] families were accepting of a gay member – far from it! The most normal thing to happen was to keep it hidden, perhaps never to 'come out'. In regard to certain family members, particularly parents, and the reactions of siblings tended to be mixed – acceptance by perhaps one, but rejection by others. This is going on memories of what I learnt from friends in the past. I was very lucky to have such a close family myself...and their support was invaluable (Rebecca Diary Week Four)

Here Rebecca constructs her experience of sibling (and parental) acceptance as unusual for the period in which she came out. Scared by some of her LGB friends' tales of rejection, Rebecca indicates how lucky she was to be accepted and supported by her entire family unit. This acceptance was particularly important for her as, at the time, she was facing some emotional difficulties with accepting her own sexuality.

These participant stories concerning happy and accepting initial responses to the disclosure of LGB sexualities, subvert the expected and normative accounts of disclosure in families. These siblings have not rejected their LGB brothers and sisters, and the news of their sexuality has not instigated crisis in their relationships. These stories are, then, suggestive of a more nuanced and diverse picture of coming out in families, one where siblings are becoming increasingly gay positive. However, that is not to say that my participants did not experience similar reactions to those reported by parents in the existing literature (Savin-Williams and Dube 1998), notably that of shock, anger, concern, disappointed

and rejection, as I go on to show below. Yet, the stories indicate that for some, these negative emotions were not experienced because they were disappointed that they had a LGB brother or sister, but rather these emotions were linked to the way their sibling's sexuality had been regulated or managed in the family. These stories show how sibling reactions are often heavily tied up in relationships with others.

### *Shock*

Some of the participants in this study reported feelings of shock upon discovering, or being told about their sibling's LGB sexuality (see also Hilton and Szymanski 2011). As all of the participants grew up within a heteronormative society, where there is a presumption that everyone is heterosexual (Salzburg 1996), the revelation of a sibling's LGB sexuality elicited feelings of shock for some heterosexual participants who were not prepared for their brother's or sister's identity. Angel-Paul, for example, told an amusing story about how his brother was so shocked when he came out to him that he actually dropped his dinner on the floor:

**Angel-Paul:** We were watching TV um and my mum was talking about partners; my brother and his girlfriend and I just went to [my brother] 'oh I have got a boyfriend'. He had dinner, and his dinner just went whoosh on the floor

**Sarah:** It fell on the floor?

**Angel-Paul:** Yeah and then he was like, and um after about 10 minutes he was like 'I can't believe I just wasted my food on you saying that'.

Returning to the account of Anne, she too experienced some feelings of shock when her sister came out to her; 'it probably did take me back, but perhaps, partly perhaps because I just, yeah because I just hadn't seen it coming'. Like some of the participants in Hilton and Szymanski (2011) research, Anne equated her feelings of shock to her naivety and lack of exposure to LGB sexualities. Anne explained that she was raised in a family that had created a silence around the communication of sex and sexuality, similar to some of the families (in the second model) I presented in chapter four. Anne, for example, described having a lack of awareness of LGB sexualities, until she entered university as a young adult: 'we weren't very worldly at all. I don't think I was really that aware of sexuality probably until, probably university'. For Anne, then, learning of her sister's sexuality was a considerable shock, as she had not expected her to be anything but heterosexual. K. Hepburn, another heterosexual participant, also indicated that she was 'really really shocked' when she found out that her brother was



gay. Part of K. Hepburn's reaction was related to discovering her brother's sexuality through the medium of Facebook, as discussed in the previous section, but K. Hepburn had also not expected her brother to be gay.

Sibling shock was not just linked to a sense of naivety, but for some participants it brought up issues of relational identity and intimacy. Prior to disclosure some of the heterosexual siblings felt they knew who their siblings 'really' were and they were very close. Disclosure, however, raised questions about a siblings 'true' identity and the strength of the sibling connection in light of any perceived deception. Anne, for example, talked about how she was shocked when her sister came out and how this meant that she had to rethink and redefine what she knew about her sister:

I suppose I was probably seeing her in a different way for the first time um [Sarah: different in terms of?] well just, yeah it's, I suppose you sort of think you know your brother or your sister and you just assume, you know, that you know them and then something like that happens and you think 'oh right!' (Anne)

Anne talked about having a close and intimate relationship with her sister, yet, as demonstrated here, the process of disclosure raised questions for her about who her sister was, and the kinds of things she knew about her sisters 'authentic' self. Anne needed some time to adjust to this new information and to think about what she knew about her sister. It is however, important to acknowledge that Anne's feelings of shock were not related to finding her sister's sexuality repulsive as reported by some of the parents in the coming out literature (see Savin-Williams and Dube 1998). Indeed, as indicated previously, Anne was very happy and pleased for her sister. Yet Anne did talk of needed some time to redefine what she knew about who her sister was and what this meant for their relationship.

### *Anger*

When analysing traditional coming out stories, anger is depicted as a common reaction, or stage that parents experience when learning that they have a gay or lesbian child (Baptist and Allen 2008; D'Augelli 2006; Savin-Williams 2001). The reasons cited in the literature for parental anger range from the supposed external 'causes' of a child's LGB status, to anger at the self for 'causing' their child's sexuality through bad or adequate parenting, and the selfishness of their children for 'choosing' to be this way (Savin-Williams 1998). When the gaze is shifted to siblings, it is curious to note that anger also plays a prominent role in initial experiences of disclosure. Several of the LGB and heterosexual

participants in my study described dealing with difficult emotions of anger, hurt and betrayal during the coming out process. In Molly's account, she described how her brother's angry reaction was directly linked to her being a lesbian, much like some of the research on parents. What was however interesting to note, was that for all of heterosexual siblings these powerful emotions were not a result of learning that they had an LGB brother or sister, but instead arose as a consequence of discovering that their parents had kept the secret of their sibling's sexuality from them. These negative emotions, then, were not directed at LGB siblings, but at parents who attempted to regulate the sibling coming out process and caused tension in sibling connections.

In chapter four, I highlighted some of the complex patterns of sexual regulation in families and the negative consequences that this could have for individuals and for the relational connections between family members. As one of the heterosexual siblings who was 'protected' from the knowledge of her sister's sexuality, Charlotte's account adds another dimension to the discussion of consequences. Charlotte talked of feeling angry and betrayed when she discovered that her mother had prevented her sister from coming out to her. Charlotte explained that she was the only family member who was not told about her sister's sexuality, as her mother had felt she was too innocent to know and that she was at risk of having her own sexual 'choices' influenced:

It bothered me that I didn't get told, that really pissed me off...Why didn't she tell me? Why did [mum] forbid Cora from telling me because I think that is, I think that is really wrong and I think, I think that would make me, if I was in Cora's shoes, feel really bad to think that I had something that was like a contagious disease, that you can't tell anyone about just in case, you know [it influenced them]  
(Charlotte)

In her sibling sticker chart, Charlotte used a negative emoticon to portray how angry she was at her mother for trying to hide her sister's sexuality from her.



Figure 5.5 Charlotte – During Sibling Coming Out

Charlotte's anger stemmed, not just from being the only family member excluded from privileged and personal information about her sister, but she also expressed her discontent with the lack of acceptance her mother had for her sister (see also Hilton and Szymanski 2011). Charlotte painted a bleak picture of her mother going 'crazy' calling her sister's sexuality a 'disgusting illness' and not being able to accept her for who she was. Her mother's reaction was in direct contrast to the way that Charlotte accepted her sister's sexuality, not feeling that it was a big deal. Charlotte articulated her strong sense of disapproval of her mother, indicating how offensive she found her attitudes and behaviours. These feelings of rage went so deep that Charlotte confronted her mother and voiced her sense of wrongdoing at way she had treated her sister: 'I burst into my mum's room and literally just let go. I was just like 'I am so disgusted in you, I think you are fucking sick'. In challenging her mother, Charlotte was also demonstrating a strong sense of solidarity towards her sister (Allan 1977). She was indicating that she supported and loved her sister and would stand up for her against anyone who intentionally or unintentionally tried to hurt her. Alongside anger, Charlotte also spoke of a real sense of sadness and confusion at how her mother could have reacted in such a way:

It is a real lack, it is such, I can't think, I can't think of the word, but I think it is just a lack of character, like if you have that, that is a real downfall. I think it is quite sad in this society that you can be like that especially to your child, so that is something that really made me angry at her (Charlotte)

Here, Charlotte appears to be evaluating the moral character of her mother, against the positive shift in attitudes towards LGBs 'in this society'. In light of so many positive changes, as noted by Weeks in the previous chapter, Charlotte alludes to her mother's small mindedness as a personality flaw she cannot

understand. It is not just the social context which is important to Charlotte, but here she tells us that there is something even more sad, hurtful and troubling that her mother has rejected her *own child* because of her sexuality. Charlotte appears to be alluding to the sanctity of the family as a unit that embodies notions of support, love, commitment, and togetherness, indicating that acceptance would have been the 'right' way to respond to her daughter (Finch 1989; Finch and Mason 1991; 1993; Williams 2004). When Charlotte discovered the way her mother had reacted there was an initial loss of intimacy between them, as Charlotte repositioned her mother as someone different, someone unknown, and someone to be ashamed of in the context of her family.

Emotions of anger, hurt and betrayal were also evident in Dragon's coming out story. As another participant who was under pressure from his parents to regulate the expression and performance of his sexuality, Dragon recalled hiding his sexuality from his brother for over 10 years. When Dragon's sexuality was finally revealed, Dragon spoke of how angry his brother was at their parents for lying to him for so long:

[My brother] was not upset with *me* because he knew that I was just obeying instructions and that I didn't have much of a choice, but he was really upset with my parents, really, really upset...He was really, really pissed off. He was really angry at my parents, 'what the hell? Really, what do you think I am? (pause) Why have you been lying to me so blatantly? (Dragon)

My brother felt betrayed and that we had been lying to him for a long time. He felt distrusted that he could not handle this type of information (Dragon)

As these extracts demonstrate, at the point of disclosure Dragon's brother 'reacted really badly', not because he had a gay sibling, but because his parents had constructed secrets and lies about Dragon's sexuality and his life. His anger then, related to feelings of exclusion from the family. Dragon's brother struggled to comprehend why he had been the only family member to be kept from this knowledge, and he felt betrayed for being purposely lied too for so long. Dragon's brother was angry and disappointed that they had depicted him as being too young and naive, and not trustworthy enough to handle this information.

Dragon's and Charlotte's accounts indicate that it was not the disclosure of a sibling's LGB sexuality that precipitated crisis in the family, as both their siblings were very accepting and supportive, but rather it was the secrets and lies that had been told by parents and the experience of exclusion, which evoked powerful feelings of anger. This suggests that sibling reactions to disclosure can be tied up in the relational connections to other family members and understandings of what is the right and proper thing to do in families.

### *Concern*

Practices of care and concern were also at the heart of some of the heterosexual sibling stories of disclosure. This is perhaps not surprising, given that an ethic of care has been argued to be as essential practice within meaningful family life (see Finch and Mason 1993; Morgan 1996; Williams 2004), and more specifically caring for one another is one of the ways in which siblings experience material and embodied aspects of their identities and relationships (Edwards *et al.*, 2006; Mauthner 2005). Some of the heterosexual siblings in this research recalled reacting with worry linked, in part, to an apprehension that their siblings would be treated unfavourably for belonging to a sexual minority. Some heterosexual participants discussed concerns that their siblings could be discriminated against, verbally or physically harassed, be unsafe, or that their life will be more difficult (see, also, Beeler and DiProva 1999; Conley 2011; Herdt and Koff 2000; Willoughby *et al.*, 2008). Expanding on his accepting reaction, Fred, for example described feeling sad and concerned that his sister could encompass difficulties in her life for being a lesbian:

I have never felt any kind of sense that this is anything other than just a, um kind of sad because then to be a 'homosexual', certainly in those days, meant quite a traumatic life. It meant you are outside normal society and it meant you were going to have to struggle for an awful lot of what you were going to achieve in life in a personal sense at least. So it was more to do with a sadness that you are setting yourself up here for an awful lot of unhappiness (Fred)

Here, Fred recognises that an LGB identity has been linked to stigma and social undesirability - 'To be called 'homosexual' is to be degraded, denounced, devalued or treated as different' (Plummer 1975 p.175) and that living a life as an LGB person was potentially difficult and traumatic within the specific time and social context in which his sister came out.

Like Fred, Nikki (the heterosexual Wilson sister) also reflected on being worried about the hardship her sister could face, 'I was concerned for [Tamara] because of other people's reactions and prejudice she may come up against in the future because of her sexuality' (Diary Week Three). Yet Nikki also described a worry that her sister's identity could have a negative impact upon her *own* life. Describing herself as a 'traditionalist' who had invested a great deal (both as a child and an adult) in trying to 'fit in' and please people, Nikki was worried that Tamara's grapple with her sexuality could affect her own moral reputation and social standing. Nikki feared that her own character could be diminished in the eyes of others, due to her association with a 'less traditional' way of life:

**Nikki:** [Tamara] wasn't sure whether she was bisexual and she was talking about feelings towards men as well as towards women, sexual feelings, and mmm

**Sarah:** How did that make you feel?

**Nikki:** I think I found that more difficult, being probably as you've gleaned from what I've said so far, quite a sort of straight conventional type, wanting to fit in type of person. I think I found that harder to be comfortable with that, then yeah to think she's she's gay and also, but also I think being what I am, you know, I think the problem is I think it is important to fit in at some way in your life, you know, and I think it concerned me, the bisexuality thing that it would be harder for her you know, to be, to find acceptance and to lead a lifestyle, you know. Whether I was concerned for her, or whether I was concerned for me, what people would, you know, think. So I guess because I'm, yeah, a bit more conventional that it was harder for me to kind of consider that option

Here, Nikki articulates a fear of 'courtesy stigma' (Goffman 1963). Empirical research with parents has drawn attention to similar concerns that a child's LGB status could affect their own lives and impart stigma upon their families. Crosbie-Burnett *et al* (1996), for example, argue that through the process of disclosure, the family can lose its normalised heterosexual positioning in society, and can be placed in a marginalised context. They indicate that parents struggle with a sense of stigma and marginalisation, as they become vulnerable to homophobia and the anti-gay sentiment in mainstream society. Research on sibling relationships has also indicated that the moral reputations of individuals can be heavily tied up and influenced by the behaviour or characteristics of their siblings. For example, writing about how sibling identities can be shaped and negotiated in different geographical, social and cultural

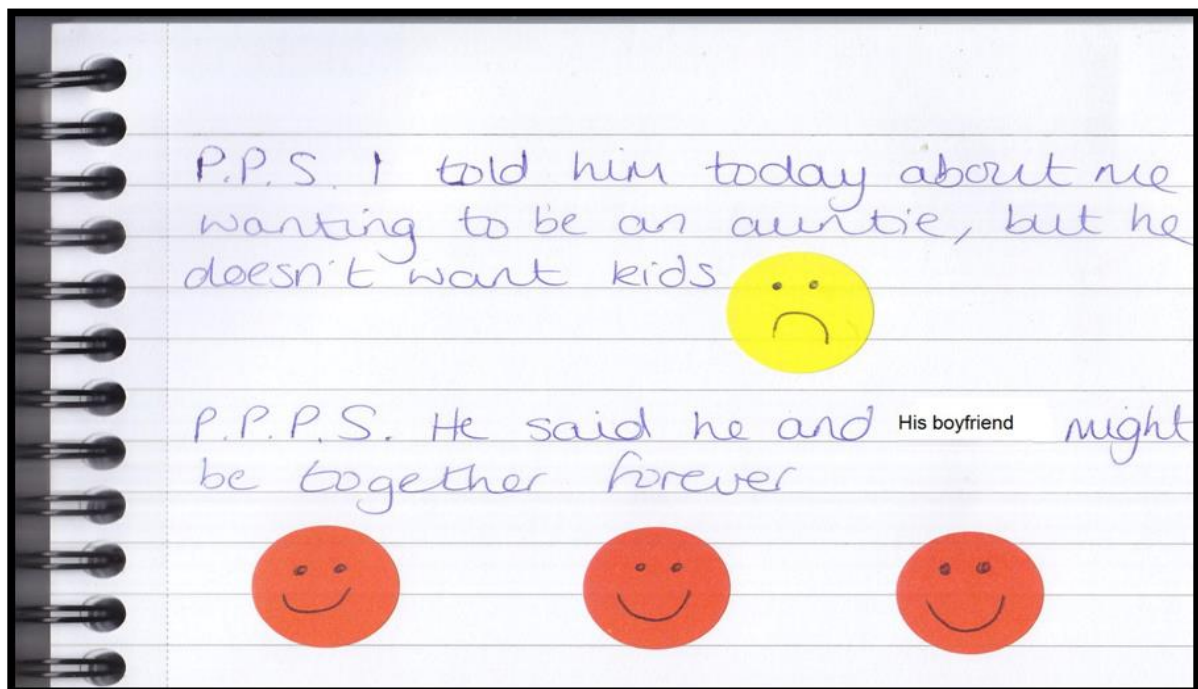
landscapes, Edwards *et al* (2006) suggest that siblings can be 'shown up', 'embarrassed', or 'mortified' by the way that brothers and sisters conduct themselves 'inappropriately' in the context of community living (p. 107). In her account, Nikki also points to the difficulty of her sister being bisexual, indicating that she would have been happier and more comfortable if her sister defined herself as gay. Here, Nikki is perhaps acknowledging some of the difficulties that her sister might face with biphobia - understood as 'prejudice against bisexuality' and 'the denigration of bisexuality as a life choice' (Bennett 1992 p. 205-207). Nikki's fears could include her sexuality being perceived as a non-existent 'other' (Eliason 2001), 'double discrimination' from heterosexual and lesbian and gay community's (Ochs 1996), and persuasive stereotypes about bisexual individuals having a heightened sexuality, and promiscuous, non-monogamous relationships (Klesse 2005).

### *Disappointment*

Two of my heterosexual participants reported feeling disappointed by the disclosure of their LGB sibling's sexuality. Interestingly, this disappointment was related to a loss of imagined futures for their sibling relationships. Heather and Audrey, talked about some of the heteronormative expectations they held for their siblings, which included plans for them to get married and have children. For Heather and Audrey, these were important milestones that they had expected to share with, and experience with, their brothers and sisters. Learning of their sibling's non-heterosexuality disrupted these important hopes and dreams. Audrey, for example articulated her longing to be what she described as a 'blood aunty'. In her interview, she spent a great deal of time talking about the importance of her family; specifically how close they were, the significance of their heritage, and their everyday practices as a unit to which they belonged. For Audrey though, family was understood in a traditional sense; a biological and heteronormative entity which was valued above all other significant social connections and personal relationships in her life. The disclosure of her brother's sexuality temporarily disrupted her understanding of 'proper' family life. She talked of feeling 'a bit bitter that we had this picturesque family and it kind of changed it a little bit' because her brother was not adhering to the heteronormative and traditional family values that she held as important. Audrey's disappointment also arose from an understanding that the future she had envisioned with her brother, like seeing him get married and have children were unlikely to happen as she originally thought:

One of the first thoughts that came to my head after I found out that he was gay was um I am never going to be a blood aunty and I was like gutted and I am still gutted about that, like hugely gutted (Audrey)

This sense of disappointment was further emphasised by Audrey in her written diary, where she describes a conversation with her brother where he indicates that he does not want to have children. Audrey chose to include a negative emoticon (from the sibling sticker chart exercise) to illustrate her disappointment that she would not have the opportunity to be an aunty (see figure 5.6). However, Audrey also uses three positive emoticons to show how happy she is that her brother might be with his boyfriend 'forever'.



**Figure 5.6 Audrey–Diary Week Four**

Similarly, Heather described her explicit expectations for having children and getting married alongside her older sister. Heather explained that as children, they were very close and 'would do everything together', and this intimate connection was something she hoped would remain well into adulthood. Heather thought that she and her sister 'would grow up and have babies together at the same time' and would be able to support each other during these times. However, Heather recalled thinking that 'being a lesbian...meant that you couldn't have children, no marri[age], no nothing' and she described the sense of disappointment she felt for her sister, but also for herself in losing the expectations she had for their future. This sense of disappointment was articulated in Heather's Sibling Sticker Chart.



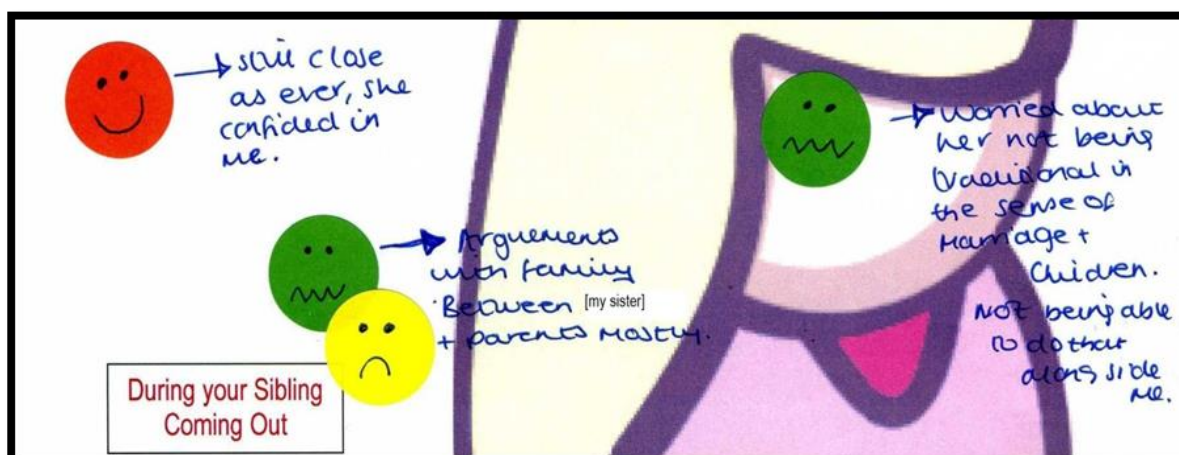


Figure 5.7 Heather – During Sibling Coming Out<sup>50</sup>

Heather's Sibling Sticker Chart reveals the range of conflicting emotions that she felt when her sister came out. While she recalled feeling happy and pleased that her sister could confide in her and that their bond remained close, she also indicated how challenging and disappointing it was to have a non-traditional sibling, who was unlikely to get married and have children at the same time as her. Heather's and Audrey's accounts therefore demonstrate that the discovery of a sibling's LGB status can be initially disappointing and difficult in relation to the loss of imagined futures. As shown in chapter two, these reactions of disappointment in losing imagined future have been well documented in the literature on parents, where research suggests that mothers and fathers often have explicit heterosexual expectations for their children, including getting married and having children. When a child comes out, parents often experience a loss of the hopes and dreams they held for their future (LaSala 2000; Saltzburg 2004). They can be hurt and disappointed that important milestones which mark a parent's and child's life (such as having grandchildren) are no longer relevant (Saltzburg 2004).

### Rejection

Louis was the only participant who experienced a complete rejection from his brother at the point of disclosure. Louis explained how his brother was not able to accept him, once he discovered that he was gay:

My mum told him in the car and he didn't want to see me...he didn't see me for ages, but I think again he needed to get his head around it...yeah, he was quite umm 'I need to get my head around it because this isn't normal' you know? I think

<sup>50</sup> Please note that Heather's Sibling Sticker Chart has been edited to preserve the anonymity of her sister

he even said something like 'I need to see if I can cope with it' and I thought hang on you are my brother, so blood is thicker than water, just because I am gay does this mean you are going to disown me as a brother because you have issues you need to deal with, whereas I have just overcome mine. So that was quite difficult cos then it reminded me that there is this homophobia and negativity surrounding what I am, but then on top of that it's coming from a sibling, so it was quite difficult (Louis)

Here, Louis shows that rejection can be a lived reality in the context of sibling relationships. He tells us that his older brother, whom he depicts as 'very masculine' and 'hostile' towards LGBs, constructed Louis's sexuality as non-normative, taboo, and therefore not acceptable. As such, Louis's brother emotionally and physically distanced himself for a period of time, and severed their sibling connection. This experience was difficult for Louis, not only because he felt it was a stark reminder of the stigma and social hostility towards LGBs in society, but also because this sense of rejection called into question Louis' belief that family ties should remain strong and permanent, irrespective of sexuality. Drawing upon the metaphor of 'blood being thicker than water', Louis is demonstrating his belief that the bonds between family members and siblings, understood in a biological sense, should be the strongest and the most significant. Louis, then, finds his brother's reaction upsetting and difficult to process, as it appears to say something about his lack of commitment to their bond as brother's, well as his disapproval towards his sexuality. Louis attributed his brother's reactions to a lack of exposure to, and an understanding of LGB lives, as well as the stereotypes he held about gay people.

I think the problem is, especially people who don't understand it, they they take in all the jargon from society and then but when they actually know someone who is gay and it doesn't meet their expectations, they just don't know how to react to it (Louis)

Louis also felt that his coming out experience had been complicated by not being able to come out to his brother and 'explain' for himself (as previously discussed). While this experience of rejection was very difficult for Louis, it is important to indicate that his story was unique when compared to the other sibling accounts of coming out.

## Conclusion

This chapter has addressed my first and second research questions, by exploring the processes through which LGB individuals manage the sibling coming out process and by taking account of how heterosexual siblings initially reacted to experiences of disclosure. The purpose of this chapter was to gain an insight into the way sexuality was managed and experienced within sibling relationships, in light of the marginalisation and neglect of sibling stories in the mainstream accounts of disclosure to families.

This chapter has demonstrated that siblings often play a significant role in the experiences of disclosure. All but one of the LGB participants were out to at least one of their brothers or sisters, and almost half of these participants had chosen to disclose to their siblings before anyone else in the family. For most, the process of coming out to siblings was constructed as a meaningful and a carefully calculated process. Some participants like Angel-Paul and Monkey, reinforced the dominant narrative of coming out to their non-gay siblings as treacherous and they articulated concerns that disclosure would be putting their close and meaningful sibling relationships at risk. Others like Georgina, however appeared to have little concern about disclosing to their siblings as they believed that their relationships were founded on unbreakable bonds of togetherness, belonging and life-long commitment. Findings suggested that considerable thought was also put into choosing the right method to come out (i.e. face to face, on the phone, or through social networking sites) which was influenced by predicted reactions, geographic distance, and moments of opportunity.

In this chapter, I have also detailed the emotions associated with disclosure. I have demonstrated that heterosexual siblings are often profoundly affected by learning that they have a LGB brother or sister. I have shown that emotions experienced by heterosexual siblings when they discover that they have an LGB brother or sister are extremely complex and fluid. In contrast to some of the neat models that have presented predictable stages of grief and mourning by parents (i.e. starting at shock, then denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and ending with acceptance, see Savin-Williams and Dube 1998), the sibling stories demonstrated that it was possible to experience a range of simultaneous emotions when learning that you have an LGB brother or sister, like joy, disappointment and anger. It is however important to recognise that the majority of sibling stories told in this chapter trouble and question the dominant cultural narratives of grief, crisis, and rejection. While not denying the existence of these negative experiences, and the account of Louis, for example, illustrates how rejection can still be a lived reality within the sibling relationship. I do however suggest that acceptance was a more

common reaction. This chapter, then, has presented a different account of coming out, suggesting that disclosure to certain family members (i.e. siblings) is perhaps less crisis provoking than has been traditionally theorised and expected.

The findings on emotions become particularly interesting when we look at some of the reasons for these positive and negative sibling responses. What we begin to see is that it is often not a sibling's LGB sexuality that is in itself emotive, but it is the way that sexuality is regulated and managed within the family that generates strong positive and negative feelings for heterosexual siblings. What this tells us, is that coming out emotions are not only tied up in understandings of the self, but also in relational connections to siblings and wider family members. Meaning that the relationships the heterosexual siblings had with their LGB siblings contributed powerfully to the way they saw themselves, how they felt and how they acted (Edwards *et al.*, 2006). Heterosexual siblings also appeared to be attentive to maintaining and building upon their sibling relationships, even if they were worried or disappointed by the implications of their sibling's sexuality (e.g. not having children or being stigmatised). As I will go onto show in more detail in the following chapter, most heterosexual participants remain committed to the care and support of their siblings, even when they have been emotionally affected by the coming out process.

In the next and final empirical chapter, I continue to explore and build upon the impact that coming out has upon sibling relationships. I consider some of the ways in which *being out* (as opposed to coming out) as LGB affects the bond that brothers and sisters have with one another. A longitudinal temporal perspective, which shapes this next chapter, explores how the disclosure of LGB sexualities changes and evolves the structure of relationships between siblings over time.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Siblings in Transition: For Better, For Worse?**

Marshall and Audrey are a brother and sister who grew up in a large, close knit family. As children, Marshall and Audrey were separated by their differences. Marshall was quiet and relatively introverted, compared to Audrey who was outgoing and sociable. Growing up they had little in common and their relationship was marked by persistent distance and conflict; they constantly bickered, teased, and fought with one another. However, Marshall's coming out experience represented a significant moment of change in their sibling bond. For Marshall, disclosure meant that he could be honest with his sister about who he was and who he loved. He could introduce her to his long-term partner and demonstrate he trusted her enough to keep the secret of the life they had built together. For Audrey, disclosure strengthened the bond that she had with her brother, creating a new level of connectedness based on trust, reciprocity and intimacy. Coming out changed the way that Marshall and Audrey interacted; they started to talk about the things that mattered to them and share their feelings and experiences in a way that they had not been able to do before. They invested greater time and effort in seeing each other regularly and enjoying a shared love of terrible films and dancing. Although Marshall and Audrey recognised that their sibling relationship was far from perfect and they were still competitive and argumentative with one another, the coming out experience transformed their connection. Their distant and conflicted past was replaced by a new relationship characterised by closeness, care, and 'real' friendship.

#### **Introduction**

The story of Marshall and Audrey demonstrates that coming out, and being out, can instigate significant change in the way that siblings relate to one another through the passage of time. For these siblings, the transformation of their bond was a positive one, with disclosure fostering new feelings of closeness, honesty and trust. Part of this new sense of intimacy arose from a change in their everyday sibling practices (Morgan 1996; 2011), where there was greater emphasis upon the importance of talking, spending quality time together, and caring for each other after Marshall came out. Marshall and Audrey were not alone in noting how processes of disclosure can transform the relational connections between

LGB and heterosexual siblings. Indeed, similar stories from the Wilson sisters, the Taylor siblings, and many other LGB participants, point towards the variety of ways sibling relationships can shift and evolve through the shared experience of disclosure. It is these sibling transformations that are explored in this chapter.

Perhaps the emphasis upon change and transformation in sibling stories is not surprising, given the extensive body of literature that has explored changes to family and sibling life (as explored in chapter two). Within this literature on families, there has also been a growing interest in the sociological analysis of time and how it governs, informs, and changes meanings and relationships. Morgan (1996), for example, suggests that 'time and space are key axes around which the analysis of family processes should be developed. Family relationships are relationships that are established, and broken, over time' (p. 137). Research on sibling life has also paid attention to issues of time. Analysis of sibling relations over the life span has, for example, explored how certain events like leaving home, getting married, having children (Mauthner 2005), being diagnosed with chronic illness, or experiencing the death of a parent or family member (Conger and Little 2010; Connidis 1992) can shift and disrupt the everyday practices between siblings. What this literature has not accounted for is the influence of time on sibling experiences and reactions to coming out, nor has it shown how these relationships shift in positive and negative ways over the passage of time. These are issues that are brought to the forefront of this chapter.

Moving beyond initial stories of disclosure (as explored in chapter five) this third and final empirical chapter focuses upon the ways that coming out can impact upon relationships between LGB and heterosexual siblings over time. By building a picture of sibling relationships and the negotiation of sexuality before, during and after coming out, I suggest that we can begin to see how coming out changes the connections between siblings, mostly for the better, but sometimes for the worst. In the first section, I show how disclosure can work to strengthen sibling bonds over time. Stories told by the Taylor, Campbell and Wilson brothers and sisters demonstrates how being out fosters a greater sense of intimacy through talk, interaction, support, care and protection. I suggest that these stories of love, commitment, and strength run counter to, and provide an alternative account of coming out that is not based upon familiar experiences of rejection and harm. In section two, stories from Molly, Louis and Filius document how, for some, coming out changes their sibling connections for the worse. Examples of rupture and breakdown between LGB and heterosexual siblings act as powerful illustrations as to why disclosure still remains to be a risky business in families.

## Section One: For Better

I think that in general coming out has had a positive impact on my relationship with my sister. There's been less rivalry and competition and we've been on friendly terms. She's become more of an ally (Angie Diary Week Three)

Like Angie, the majority of heterosexual and LGB participants in this study, framed their experiences of change in a positive way. Participant stories revealed how the disclosure of non-heterosexuality in sibling dynamics worked to improve and strengthen bonds. Accounts revealed that sibling relationships had become closer, more intimate, supportive and protective after the process of disclosure. These stories of positive change run counter to the dominant narrative of family rejection and breakdown (Plummer 1995; Savin-Williams and Dube 1998), adding weight to the argument made in the previous chapter, that siblings are becoming increasingly supportive and accepting of LGB sexualities.

### *Closeness and Intimacy*

One of the central themes among positive stories of change was enhanced feelings of closeness and intimacy. Thirteen of the participants noted how the act of disclosure and sharing thoughts and feelings about sexuality created new or stronger feelings of closeness and unity in their sibling connections. This was reflected in the interview accounts: 'I think [coming out] has made us closer' (Ellen), '[Coming out] definitely brought us closer' (Louis) and in the written diaries: 'The main impact coming out has had on my sibling relationships is that the relationships are much closer' (Sue Diary Week Three). LGB and heterosexual participants attributed an improvement in the quality of their sibling connection to being more open, honest, trusting, communicative, and interactive. As explored in more detail below.

As indicated in Marshall and Audrey's vignette at the beginning of this chapter, a new sense of togetherness and trust was essential to the positive transformation in their relationship. Reflecting on their interaction prior to coming out, Marshall and Audrey both indicated that they had a relatively distant connection with one other. That is not to say that they did not acknowledge that they were similar in some way, or that they did not enjoy spending time together as children. As Marshall illustrated; 'I enjoyed playing games when we were younger. Like if it was a sunny day, we would go cycling around in the garden or go on the swing or you know throw apples at each other off the tree (laughing)'. Yet in explaining how they were separated by their different personalities, interests and

general approach to life, Audrey felt that they 'didn't really have much to do with each other' when they were growing up and Marshall similarly indicated that they 'didn't get on at all'. However, Marshall and Audrey indicated that their relationship was transformed by the coming out process. Marshall talked of them becoming much closer as he was able to open up and share important and privileged knowledge about his life with Audrey that he had previously hidden:

[Coming out] made us a bit closer actually because there is no, no real secrets between us now and I think that's been quite good because, well not so much an honesty sort of thing, but because there is no, I think there is more of a trust sort of thing... yeah it is sort of a trust thing, I trust her with this and she with telling me about the relationships she has been having (Marshall)

As Marshall indicates, it was only through the process of disclosure that he realised his younger sister was someone he could trust and count on as an ally and as a protector of his secret. Audrey metaphorically grew in Marshall's eyes, by demonstrating emotional maturity that ran counter to his previous understandings of her as 'a little bit young and silly'. Here, Marshall also suggests that it was experiences of reciprocity and mutual openness and trust that helped them to build and renegotiate a closer and more positive relationship. Through talking and sharing their thoughts, feelings, experiences and secrets, what Jamison (1998; 2011) calls 'disclosing intimacy', Marshall and Audrey they were creating a privileged knowledge of one another. Smart (2011) suggests that this type of confiding and secret keeping between family members can facilitate powerful feelings of closeness and inclusivity.

In her research account, Audrey also recalled the positive change in her relationship with Marshall, and how this was instantaneous with the moment he revealed his sexuality. Audrey indicated that disclosure helped to foster a new level in their relationship, where they could connect and talk about important parts of their lives with one another, in ways they had not done before:

We just kind of started talking about [his sexuality] and then I really thought oh this is nice that this is my brother, but we are actually chatting about like real life things rather than you know funny videos or whatever...I really really liked that, I just felt like, I felt like I had a proper proper big brother...I can talk to, talk with my brother about anything now I reckon that point it was like the changing point for us I obviously felt a *massive* change and I really, really liked it and I definitely felt much



closer to him then because I had felt he had opened up to me um and he didn't have to lie to me anymore and he didn't have to hide things or whatever [Sarah: Mmm just like a barrier that was maybe there just] Yeah definitely, yeah, yeah I think it was totally dashed in that moment for me because we just opened up and I think I must of, I think I opened up about things as well... it was a really, really kind of eye opener moment of what our relationship could be where we didn't have to just be brother and sister and that was how it was. We could actually get a friendship as well, which was really nice (Audrey)

For Audrey, Marshall's disclosure created a sense of intimacy and emotional connectedness in their relationship. In opening up and trusting one another, Audrey felt that their connection was no longer superficial and based on funny banter as before, but had become 'real' and meaningful. Although Audrey positions her family and the connections with them as the most important and meaningful in her life, here she is also suggesting that disclosure enabled the relationship with her brother to transcend the obligations of siblinghood into something *more*. Audrey alludes to this, using the term 'friendship' as a metaphor for praise and to explain how her bond with her brother, post disclosure, was no longer experienced as given, imposed or irrevocable, but had become characterised by a chosen sense of solidarity, mutual trust, reciprocity, love, care and equality, features which are associated with friendships<sup>51</sup> (Davies 2011; Holmes and Greco 2011; Floyd 1995; Spencer and Paul 2006; Weeks *et al.*, 2001). That is not to say that Audrey constructed her relationship with Marshall as perfect or without flaws. Indeed, Audrey told a funny tale about how after she and Marshall had spoken about his sexuality for the first time, and how she had felt so pleased and excited about a new level in their relationship, they '[returned] home, went into [their separate] bedrooms and didn't speak to each other again (laughing)'. Audrey's story perhaps shows how feelings of closeness and trust are not given, but need to be worked out and earned in the context of sibling relationships.

Marshall and Audrey were not alone in referring to the process of disclosure as an important point of transition in sibling closeness. Many of my LGB participants recognised that, in being out, there was little reason to keep secrets from their siblings, and this meant that they were able to forge new connections based on mutual trust and transparency. Monkey and Ellen illustrated this in their research diaries:

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<sup>51</sup> It is however important to note that there is a sociological debate concerning the ambiguous nature of friendships and the problem of defining the characteristics of such connections. See Spencer and Paul (2006) and Adams *et al.*, (2000).

I think in many ways coming out has brought us closer, simply because there is an honesty level there between us and I am sure he feels as though I have trusted him enough to tell him something important and key to my life (Ellen Diary Week Three).

I used to lie a lot to my sister before I came out so it's great to be able to tell the truth now and talk about relationships and stuff now, so that's made things a lot easier for me (Monkey Diary Week Three)

As demonstrated here by Monkey and Ellen, and previously by Marshall and Audrey, one of the shifting practices that enabled these siblings to forge and maintain transparency and closeness, was the presence of talk.

### *Sibling Talk*

The role of communication in close sibling relationships and, more specifically, the connection between sisters has been widely explored (Edwards *et al.*, 2006; Floyd 1995; Rocca *et al.*, 2010; Stark 2007). Edwards *et al* (2006), for example, indicate that disclosing intimacy was one of the recurrent practices that young girls engaged in as an embodied aspect of their sibling identity and relationships. Edwards *et al* (2006) suggest that talking to one another represents a sense of emotional connectedness and closeness for young sisters. Talking has also been understood to be the hallmark of close adult sister connections (Mauthner 2005; Stark 2007; Tannen 2008).

In my research, mundane everyday talk was at the heart of feelings of closeness in the relationships between sisters *and* brothers. Keeping in touch with one another and engaging in conversations about what they had been up to, how they were feeling, as well as advice and support about important and ordinary issues, was one of the ways that participants fostered and maintained intimate connections with their siblings. The participants used a variety of different methods to facilitate this affective talk (see, also, Gabb 2008), including face-to-face interactions, telephone conversations, text messages, emails, and social networking. Telephone calls, emails and the use of social networking sites were portrayed as particularly salient in maintaining close connections between siblings who were separated (or soon to be) by significant geographic distances. This was demonstrated by the Wilson Sisters:

I can happily ring up my sister and talk for an hour or more on the phone and we nearly always end up talking about emotional stuff and how it is kind of interconnected to our history. So yeah we are pretty close now (Tamara)

Even though she's like, location wise she's a little bit further away, we talk a lot on the phone. I mean *a lot* (laughing). On the phone it's usually like an hour, it's just the conversations are very long (Nikki)

While for many participants, the frequency of communication was an important factor for maintaining closeness, others noted how intimacy could also be fostered through periods of silence then intense talk when they got together or if something significant happened in the course of their everyday lives. As Jen illustrated:

Me and my family are really bad about keeping in touch it is really funny actually. We are not talkers on the phone, we send emails every now and then but I think um we don't really keep in touch very well. I think what really happens with my family is that we all go off and do our own lives and when something big happens we will call and be like this happened, but other than that it's when we get back together it is non-stop talking and everybody talking over one another for like four days straight...Like we went [on holiday], I met them all, my sister, my mum and my dad last weekend and like we literally for one day we just sat in the hotel and like at the restaurant and talked for like 6 hours. Like we all flew to [a city abroad] and we were not even seeing anything because we are just talking (Jen)

For Jen, it is not the frequency of talk that is meaningful and important to feelings of closeness in her family, but an ability to pick up from where they left off.

A significant theme among these general stories of sibling talk was the positive changes in communication that was experienced by LGB and heterosexual siblings after the coming out process. Participants indicated that disclosure fostered more open relationships through mutual and honest talk about the things that mattered to them. Georgina, for example, indicated that the experience of being out created a shift in the relationships with her brother, eventually bringing them closer through open communication. For Georgina the path to an improved relationship was however somewhat more

complicated than for others. Georgina indicated that prior to coming out, she shared a best friendship with her younger brother Henry. They invested a great deal of time and effort in seeing one another and doing things together and this gave Georgina a sense of emotional connectedness to her brother. However, in disclosing her sexuality, the relationship that Georgina had with Henry dramatically changed. Henry was shocked, confused and felt betrayed when he learnt of his sister's sexuality. He was unable to accept Georgina and he distanced himself from her. They stopped talking and no longer got together outside of regular family gatherings.

[Coming out] affected our relationship really badly. We went from being best friends to never talking or seeing each other and this was 'heart-breaking'  
(Georgina)

Yet Georgina also indicated that over time, Henry did accept her sexuality and they started to work at rebuilding the trust and connection in their relationship. Georgina felt that this difficult experience actually contributed to strengthening their bond and bringing them closer than before, particularly as they learnt to talk to one another about the things that mattered:

We both learnt that communication is key and if we spoke straight away there would of been no problem. We now talk a lot. In fact it turns out that coming out to my family has brought us all closer as we have all learnt to talk and communicate and support each other (Georgina Diary Week Three)

As Georgina illustrates here, better communication was not just experienced in the relationship with her brother, but as a consequence of coming out, her whole family had learnt the value of talking honestly and openly with one another. By mutually disclosing the issues they were facing in their lives and how they felt, it helped the family as a whole to be more supporting and caring towards one another. This emphasis on a positive change in the *whole* family dynamic echoes the work of Baptist and Allen (2008), where they suggest that coming out can improve the connection across the family unit, as members work harder to openly communicate and share views that co-exist in the family.

The Sibling Sticker Chart data also showed how talking constituted a key practice through which some of the participants experienced close connections to their siblings. Participants used positive emoticons to map various changes in the way they communicated with their siblings after they came out.

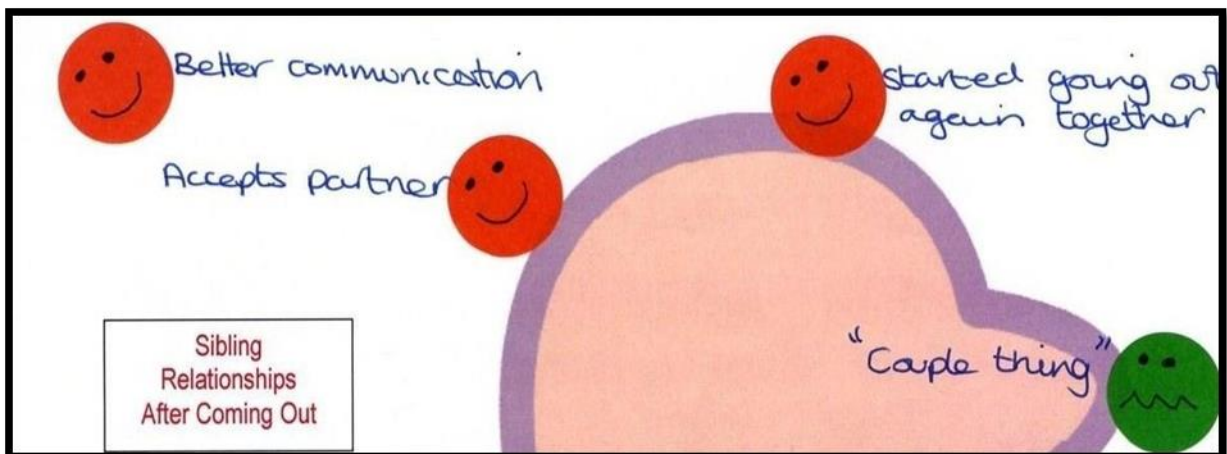


Figure 6.1 Georgina – After Coming Out

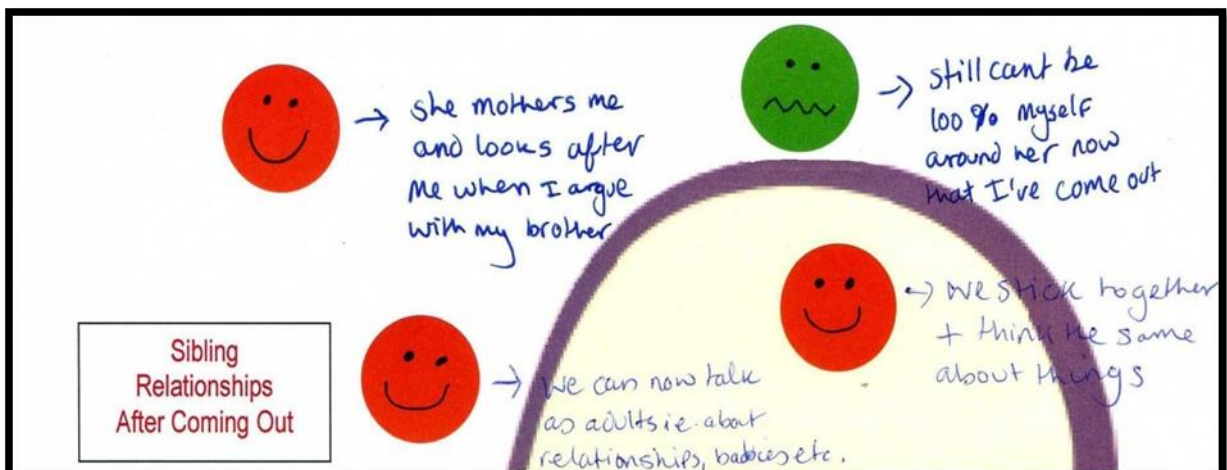


Figure 6.2 Monkey – After Coming Out

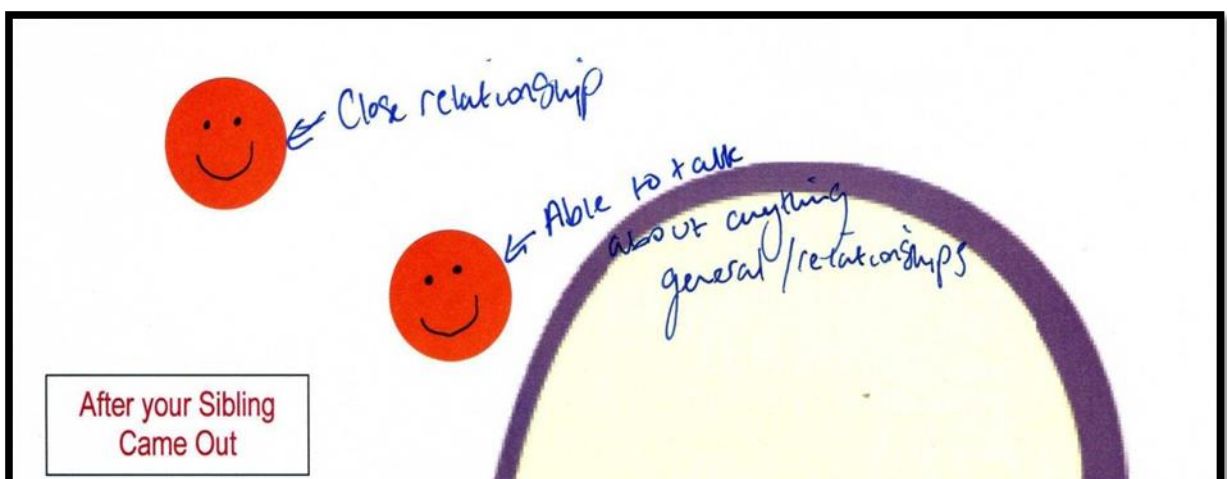


Figure 6.3 Charlotte – After Sibling Coming Out

LGB participants like Georgina and Monkey noted that disclosure enabled them to talk about a vast range of topics from relationships, sex and sexuality, to health, culture, shared histories, and their hopes and dreams for their futures (i.e. having children). Similarly, some heterosexual siblings, like Charlotte, also mapped positive emoticons to illustrate how coming out opened up the possibility of talking about *anything* with their siblings, which included personal relationships. This was something that Charlotte felt brought her much closer to her sister.

### *Quality Time and Everyday Activities*

Other factors seen to represent an improved sense of sibling closeness after the coming out process included spending quality time together and engaging in shared interests. Morgan (1996) suggests that time is often regarded as an essential element in the establishment and maintenance of a sense of family. Edwards *et al* (2006) also suggest that in the context of sibling relationships engaging in activities (particularly for boys and in brother-sister relationships) can represent a sense of close connection. Many of the participants in my study indicated that coming out increased the amount of quality time that they spent together. Socialising, going for drinks, spending time with extended families, having holidays, dancing and watching films together were all given as examples of meaningful sibling interactions. Charlotte, for example, illustrated the importance of doing things together after her sister came out:

**Sarah:** So what is your relationship like with [your sister] now? After she has come out to you?

**Charlotte:** Yeah it is good. I mean we spend quite a lot of time together and we will miss each other when she is [on holiday] or whatever, well she probably doesn't miss me (laughing) um she will come back and we will spend all day together, we will have lunch together and you know she will, she came to [visit at university] and stuff. You know just do normal things.

For Charlotte, and other participants like Anne and Holly, spending quality time together fostered strong feelings of closeness. The emphasis was on the frequency of sibling interactions and how this created a deep 'knowing [of] what is going on in each other's lives' (Charlotte). This sense of 'knowing' is a practice that Jamieson (2011) suggests can create intimacy in personal relationships. However, for other participants like Audrey, feelings of closeness were not created through the amount of time she

spent with her brother, but rather through the *quality* and ease of their interaction when they did get together.

**Audrey:** I think I am quite lucky with Marshall actually because some people just don't get on with their brothers and sisters. Like don't phone them up, and it is nice that he is here [in the same city] as well so I can actually get to see him every now and again

**Sarah:** Do you keep in contact with him lots?

**Audrey:** Yeah, well not a huge amount but kind of every now and again, like we go to this film club which is really nice. I just get a phone call every now and again, so you know and we have done coffee a few times. It's not really regular, but it's like, like an old friend who you don't have to, when you see them you don't have to deal with all of the small talk you just get straight down to it and then you don't have to see them for another 3 months kind of thing. It is kind of like that.

As similarly noted earlier in this chapter, here Audrey is using friendship as a metaphor to praise the quality of her bond with her brother. She appears to be suggesting that their intimate connection (one that is characterised by trust, openness and reciprocity) and the sense of 'knowing' one another, that has developed since Marshall came out, means that they can pick their close relationship up from where they left off regardless of how much time has passed.

### *Support, Care and Protection*

Scholars have suggested that siblings can be important sources of support to each other throughout their lives (Branje *et al.*, 2004; Stoneman 2001; Voorpostel and Van Der Lippe 2007). Whether brothers and sisters are providing care and protection through the complex negotiation of childhood and adolescence (Edwards *et al.*, 2006; Kosonen 1996; Mauthner 2005), offering emotional comfort during older age (Connidis 1994), or when faced with critical life events (e.g. parental separation and divorce) (Conger *et al.*, 2009), support is argued to be one of the defining features of sibling relationships. As indicated in chapters two and five, an ethic of care is also argued to be a fundamental practice in family life (see Finch and Mason 1993; Morgan 1996; Williams 2004), and one of the ways in which siblings maintain their identities and relationships (Edwards *et al.*, 2006; Mauthner 2005). The participants' accounts generally reflected this, and many gave illustrations of how their sibling relationships were

mutually supportive and caring across the lifespan. However, when analysing the ways in which sibling connections changed after the coming out process, notions of care, protection and support were reoccurring themes that were used to illustrate newly developed qualities of closeness and togetherness between LGB and heterosexual siblings. For example, both LGB and heterosexual participants described the practical (e.g. assistance) and emotional (e.g. shows of love and care) ways in which their relationships became more supportive after the coming out process.

A number of participants remarked that increased care and support was a positive change in their everyday sibling practices. This was, for example, illustrated in the Taylor sibling story. As the lesbian sibling, Silvia indicated that she had had a very difficult time accepting her sexuality. She recalled feeling very confused, scared, and at times 'unable to cope'. Silvia spoke of having to deal with pressures from her psychiatrist to 'change' her sexuality. Silvia talked extensively about how her younger siblings and particularly one of her brothers (Bruce) were extremely supportive and caring during this distressing time:

[My siblings] really took me under their wing and were really really kind to me, really nice and very supportive, because what was happening to me was that I was really going to pieces with it, with all this stuff that had happened and with this suggestion that I needed to you know, change and that there was really something wrong (Silvia)

As an older sibling, this experience of care from her younger siblings was quite a strange, albeit welcomed and pleasant experience for Silvia. Being cared for and supported by her siblings represented a marked difference from the role and relationships that Silvia had with them while they were growing up. In the Taylor family, Silvia was the oldest girl. As a result of her gender and birth order, she was given a great deal of responsibility (from her parents) for her siblings' care. The involvement of women in the provision of care has been the subject of major sociology inquiry. Women have been argued to routinely perform all tasks and responsibilities associated with emotional labour, particularly as they are constructed as 'natural' carers (see, for example, Oakley 1972; 1974). As reported by other older female siblings (Edwards *et al.*, 2006; Gillies and Lucey 2006), Silvia's parents had strong expectations for her to care for and protect her younger brothers and sisters; 'I was the eldest and given more responsibility, to sort of, you know help'. In the absence of her father who was



working in another city, Silvia became what Edelman (1994) termed a mini-mother<sup>52</sup>, and in her interview she gave examples of the domestic labour and caring practices that she had to enact. Given a perceived lack of choice in these caretaking duties, Silvia described feeling resentful and 'always quite separate' from her younger siblings. However, Silvia indicated that coming out was a transitional point in their relationships. Silvia not only experienced a marked change in the way she related to her siblings, but she also felt a shift in her sibling position. For the first time, Silvia was not burdened by the position of responsibility she had as the older sibling, but was rather being cared for by her younger siblings. This was a change that Silvia experienced in a positive way, noting how being comforted and nurtured in this way, allowed her to feel part of the family and to develop more intimate and stronger relationships with her siblings.

It was nice because I suppose I felt like I had a family really and perhaps I had...from feeling like I was sort of quite separate, but not in a way that, not feeling like I had much in common, just I was older, therefore I wasn't feeling that I had a family around me in a way and suddenly I did have a family and they were being really nice (Silvia)

Here, Silvia suggests that the love and compassion bestowed upon her by her siblings enabled her to shed feelings of distance and separation as the responsible oldest sibling, to feeling a sense of togetherness and belonging to a relational unit she was a part of and invested in (Ribbens McCarthy 2012). This change in Silvia's sibling connection was also articulated by her heterosexual brother, Bruce.

In his interview, Bruce indicated that the disclosure of his sister's sexuality gave him a heightened sense of the difficulties she was facing and the need for him to change the way he related to her:

I think from [Silvia's coming out] I felt much more aware of how she was coping. I think it really tuned me into the fact that she was having problems and these were major problems, they weren't going to go away. So I think it just tuned me very much into making sure that she is alright (Bruce)

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<sup>52</sup> Edelman (1994) makes use of the term 'min-mother' to describe the caring work that daughters can enact, in the context of a bereavement of a mother (p. 139). Silvia was given this responsibility in the family, in the absence of her father who was having to commute between two cities for work and was largely absent in the family home.

Before Silvia came out, Bruce had little reason to be concerned about the welfare of his sister. Yet, as he illustrates here, disclosure brought a new awareness of the emotional and physical difficulties she was facing in accepting her own sexuality, and the support that she needed from her family. Although Bruce was a younger sibling and he had not experienced any pressure (from his parents) to care for Silvia, he felt it was part of his responsibility and commitment to her as a brother to make sure she was okay. Bruce changed the way he interacted with his sister, 'doing what he could' to support her and protect her from harm. He recalled becoming more present in her life, often travelling across the country to see her and cheer her up when she was feeling depressed. Bruce also indicated that he put more effort into talking and listening to his sister, becoming someone she could confide in and get advice from. Bruce's story illustrates how men are not absent from the caring work that goes on within the connection between LGB and heterosexual brothers and sisters.

When discussing positive changes to their sibling relationships, other LGB participants felt that their heterosexual brothers and sisters become increasingly supportive, when they were faced with the daunting task of disclosing their sexuality to parents and extended family members. Revisiting the story of Jen (as explored in chapter five), she indicated that her older sister played an instrumental part in her experience of coming out and that this helped to transform their sibling relationship. Prior to disclosure, Jen described having a relatively strained connection with her sister. Although she enjoyed being close in age to her sister and sharing many of the same friends, their differences caused tension and conflict in their relationship. Jen mapped these emotions in her sibling sticker chart, showing how elements of their relationship were experienced as positive, negative and challenging before she came out.

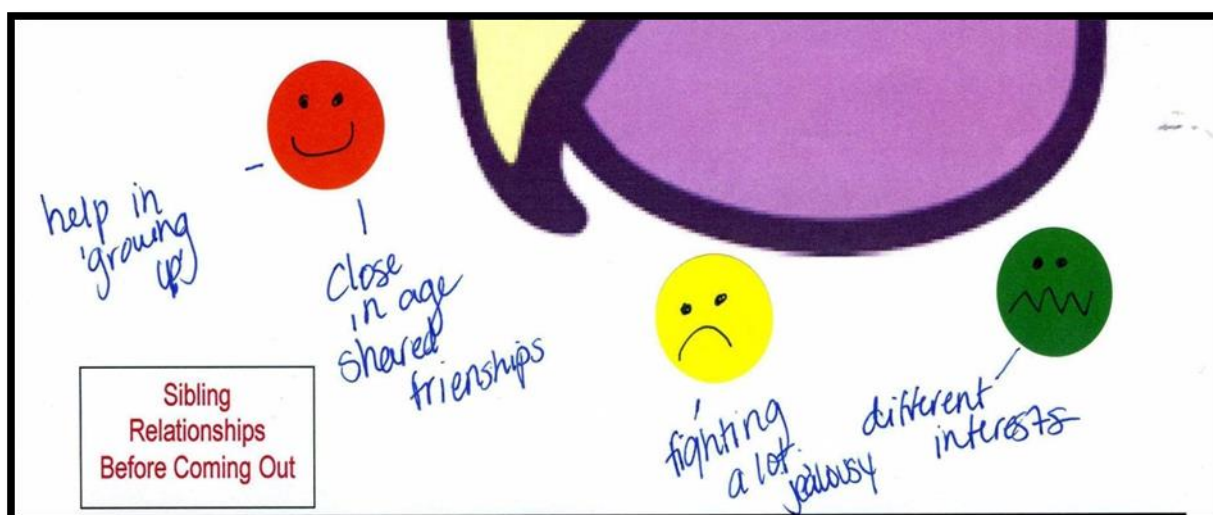


Figure 6.4 Jen – Before Coming Out

Jen positioned the disclosure of her sexuality as a key point of change in the relationship with her sister<sup>53</sup>. Both during and after coming out, Jen reported that her sister had become more supportive and compassionate towards her. Jen's sister demonstrated her commitment to their relationship and the measures she was willing to go to, to offer her practical and emotional care. This included supporting and encouraging Jen in coming out to their 'conservative' parents.

My sister kind of helped me [come out to my family], because she was actually the second or third person that I told. Yeah I mean she didn't tell them, but she was just like really supportive and she was like 'they love you and they are not going to care, or like, you know, if they do I will say something, I will talk to them' (Jen)

Jen's sister worked hard to reassure Jen that their parents loved her and that being a lesbian would not change that. However, in the case of hostility from parents, Jen's sister also demonstrated her solidarity to Jen by offering to be the one to renegotiate the acceptance of her sexuality in their family. The role that Jen's sister was offering in helping to renegotiate Jen's identity resonates with Valentine *et al*'s (2003) argument that coming out is not a personal process made by an LGB individual alone, but rather one that is made in a relational sense, illustrated by this transference of responsibility from an individual to a sibling. For Valentine *et al* (2003) what this also suggests is that coming out is not a 'one-off event of the leap of disclosure – one of Giddens's 'fateful moments' – but...a continuous dialog between family members' (p 487). They argue, then, that coming out is not something that is 'done in or to the family

<sup>53</sup> It is important to note that Jen felt that other transitional events, such as moving out of the family home and having geographical distance from one another, also contributed to the positive change in their relationship.

but rather is a process that is negotiated both with other individuals and as a collectivity' (Valentine *et al* 2003 p 487). Jen's sibling sticker chart during coming out, highlights the affective and temporal changes to the relationship that she had with her sister. Jen chose to map three positive emoticons to represent how their relationship had improved and become more supportive in light of Jen's sexuality.

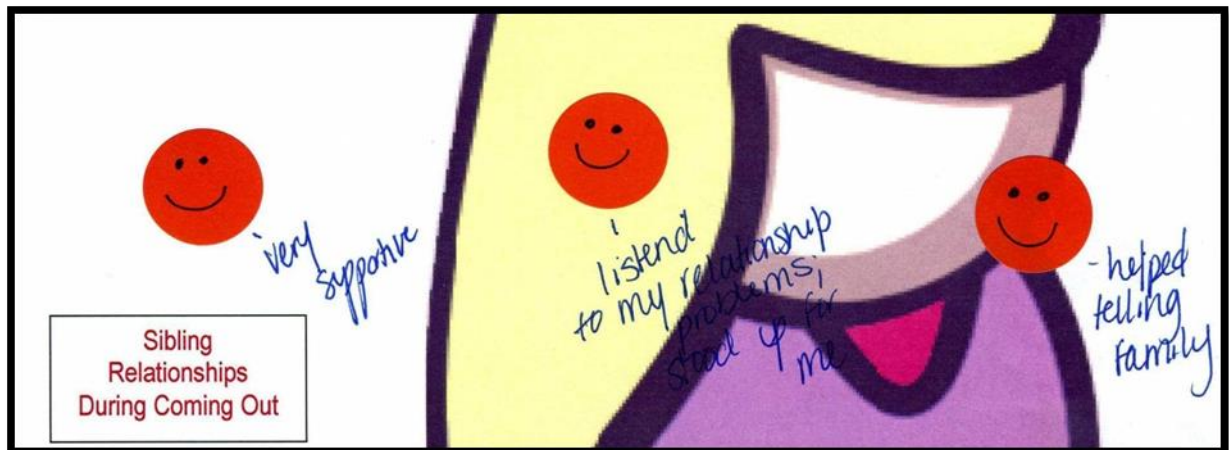


Figure 6.5 Jen – During Coming Out

Jen also indicated that the shift in the relationship with her sister became stronger and mutually supportive, as care, and protection became part of their everyday practices. Similar to Marshall and Audrey's experiences (as explored earlier), talking about issues that mattered and spending time together created a new sense of intimacy, strength and togetherness in their relationship. Furthermore, Jen indicated that her sister continued to demonstrate her alliance to their relationship by challenging their mother's attitudes and behaviours when she was unwittingly homophobic or disrespectful towards equal rights for LGBT people:

[Coming out] changed me and my sister definitely, really we are a lot closer, a lot closer. I am not sure why or how, but um maybe I think, I don't know, a little bit was because she kind of helped me fight against my mum...She is really pro-gay now, so I guess that support kind of made us closer (Jen)

The positive transformation in Jen's sister relationship was evident in the final section of her sibling sticker chart.

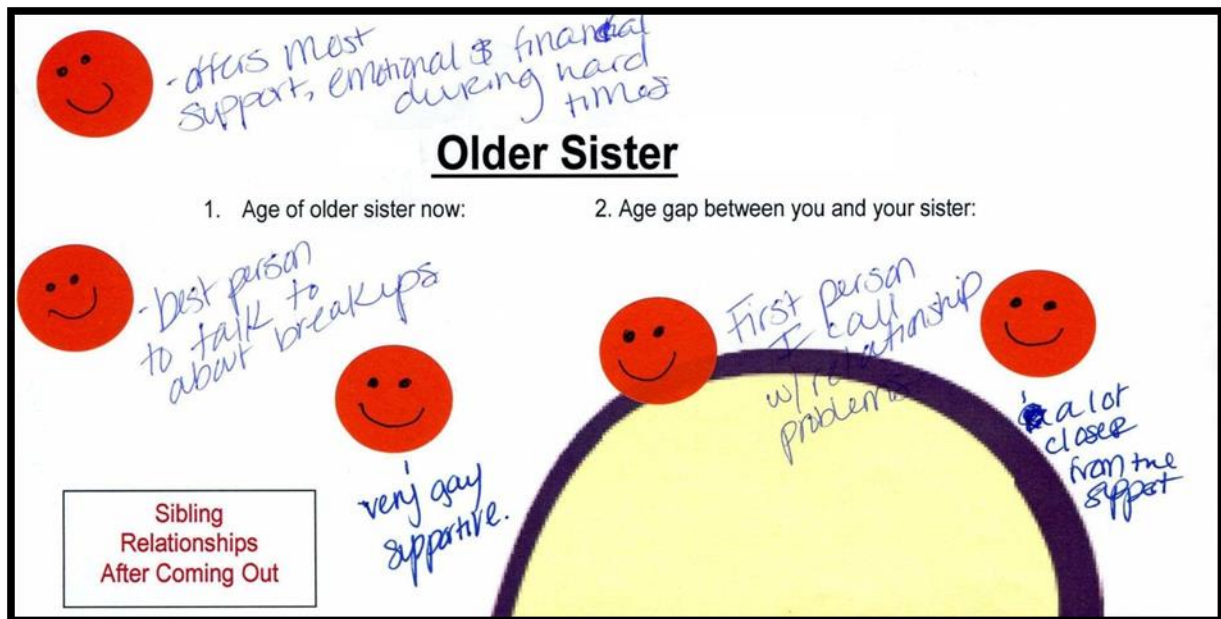


Figure 6.6 Jen – After Coming Out

When compared with Jen's relationship prior to coming out (see figure 6.4), this sibling sticker chart shows how Jen reframed her affective sibling practices in positive ways, noting how disclosure had improved their relationship and had become closer through demonstrations of love and support.

As well as care and support, protection was also a significant theme among stories of sibling change. Similar to research which suggest that siblings can protect one another during times of stress caused by critical life events (see Gass *et al.*, 2007; Jenkins and Smith 1990) or when faced with verbal or physical attack (Edwards *et al.*, 2006; Hadfield *et al.*, 2006), some of my participants recalled how their sibling relationships became more protective as a result of disclosure. Participants recalled how their siblings defended them against homophobia from family members and within local communities. Angel-Paul, for example, noted how his brother became more protective over him after he came out. When they were younger, Angel-Paul describes having quite a difficult relationship with his brother. Although he felt they were 'always close', physical aggression and jealousy dominated their relationship. However, coming out shifted their connection with Angel-Paul's brother becoming more invested in Angel-Paul's life, making sure he was okay. 'When I came out I think he used to try and protect me, he used to always come and see me, go shopping with me and stuff. I think [he] was more protective'. In addition to spending more time together, Angel-Paul described several instances where his older brother had protected him from homophobia (or what his brother perceived to be homophobia) by directly confronting perpetrators:

Just after I came out, I was on the bus going to [town], and my brother's brother-in-law was on the opposite bus and he was shouting through the window 'Angel-Paul you fucking queer' and all this and that [Sarah: Gosh]...and I told my brother and he literally phoned up his [brother-in-law's] mum and dad and said 'you need to sort Chris out' and they were like 'why?' and he was like 'Angel-Paul is in tears here, he was on the bus and your son shouted out 'you fucking queer' and all this and that and Angel-Paul just had lots of stick all the way up here'. My brother literally said 'when he gets home tell him to come up my house'. I was there and he came in and my brother was in his face going 'you ever fucking talk to my brother like that again, I will castrate you' (Angel-Paul)

Angel-Paul draws on this example to show how his brother used threats or actual experiences of physical violence to protect him from homophobia. For Angel-Paul this type of protection from his brother was particularly emotive. Angel-Paul constructed this experience as an illustration of this brother's loyalty and love, despite any underlying objections to him being gay (as outlined in chapter five). 'This made me realise how much he cares about me' (Angel-Paul Diary, Week Three). This protection evoked feelings of solidarity and closeness for Angel-Paul, which was not present in their bond prior to him coming out. What was however distinctive about Angel-Paul's story was the contradiction in his feelings about being protected.

Any boyfriend I have got, he interrogates them within the first time of meeting him... so yeah so it's nice, it just gets a bit, it's annoying. At the end of the day I am like 'this is my relationships not yours, I keep out of yours, stay out of mine' but he was like 'yeah but if they ever hurt you I am going to batter them' and I was like 'no you're fucking not' (laughing) [Sarah: (laughing)] So it is nice, but when he does gets over protective, which he can do, it gets a bit like 'oh here we go again' (Angel-Paul)

We were walking in town...and I was holding my partner's hand and someone made a sly comment, my brother literally chased him down and started beating the crap into them. I didn't, like we didn't know he had gone so we carried on walking and then I was like 'why can't I hear my brother?' Looked around and my mum was just like that [gobsmacked] and I was like 'what is going on?' she was like 'oh

someone just made a comment about you and he has gone to beat him up' I was like 'shit', so I had to chase after him to stop him (Angel-Paul)

As these stories suggest, Angel-Paul felt a real tension between pride and frustration towards his brother. On the one hand Angel-Paul acknowledges that it was 'nice' and very meaningful for his brother to stand up for him and protect him from harm. Yet Angel-Paul also emphasised how frustrating it was to have a brother that was over protective, and whom caused what he perceived as unnecessary drama, or awkwardness towards new boyfriends. Part of Angel-Paul's frustration appeared to relate to his brother infantilising him and constructing him as vulnerable and at risk because of his sexuality (see also Valentine *et al.*, 2003 for a discussion of parents infantilising their LGB children), even though Angel-Paul felt he was perfectly capable of confronting homophobia in his own way.

[My brother] is like 'is anyone bothering you' and like now I am like 'no and if anyone does start I will just knock um out myself' and I was like 'I don't care' (laughing) (Angel-Paul)

Angel-Paul's frustration may well also relate to having to manage his brothers aggression 'to stop him' from hurting homophobic people, in order to protect his brother from getting into trouble with the police.

As previously discussed in chapter five, some heterosexual participants, like Tommy, also demonstrated their care, support and protection towards their LGB brothers or sister by openly challenging anti-gay sentiment in community spaces, such as work and school. Rebecca for example, drew on an example of her younger sister (Sammy) who had stuck up for LGBs in a relatively hostile school debate about 'homosexuality':

Sammy, who was so much younger than me, she, they had some sort of forum at school and she must of been about 14 or 15 um because they had some kind of forum in her school about gays or homosexuality or something and um I remember her telling me, and I was really impressed um that she, she had spoken up for me really. You know she had sort of put the other side, because of me you know, because obviously it was alright (Rebecca)

Here Rebecca articulates her sense of pride and elation that her sister was willing to stand up for her sexual identity and 'put herself on the line' against people who were not affirming. This was a choice that Rebecca perceived to be particularly risky in an institution that operates around compulsory heterosexuality and has historically been deemed rife with homophobic discourse (Epstein and Johnson 1994; Nayak and Kehily 1996; Unks 1995). For Rebecca, this show of support was particularly meaningful as she felt it signalled her sister's acceptance and support towards her sexuality. Other heterosexual participants, like Fred, also talked about deliberately 'coming out' as having a lesbian sibling in order to make it clear to work colleagues, in male dominated industries (see Ness 2012) that being homophobic was not acceptable:

**Fred:** I mean if you work in factories or did the kinds of things I did, building sites or whatever you tend to hear an awful lot of [anti-gay sentiment] and I used [my sister's sexuality] quite consciously in a way to say, you know by the way (laughing) you know

**Sarah:** This is the way it is?

**Fred:** just sort of, you know it's not okay.

The collection of stories told in this first section suggests that coming out and being out can change the relationships between LGB and heterosexual siblings for the better. The findings indicate that practices of intimacy and care get amplified in light of disclosure, and how this works to actually strengthen and improve sibling connections over time. That is not to say that these new or more intense practices were always welcomed, and Angel-Paul's story speaks of some of the tensions involved in the negotiation and management of non-heterosexuality between siblings. I do however suggest that these stories are important as they offer a significant counter to traditional accounts of negativity in family disclosures. These are stories of improvement, love, resistance, humour, solidarity and pride; and not of anxiety, devastation and loss. While the majority of participant stories spoke strongly of this type of acceptance from siblings, the next section details the accounts of a small minority who experienced trouble in coming out to their siblings.



## Section Two: For Worse

The impact that my 'coming out' had on my sibling relationships. Well in a nutshell it definitely distanced me from my brothers (Louis Diary Week Three)

Just as some scholars have suggested that certain critical events throughout time can have a detrimental impact on patterns of sibling relationality (Conger and Little 2010; Connidis 1992, Edwards *et al.*, 2006), in this section I suggest that coming out and being out can instigate change in the relationship between LGB and heterosexual siblings, for the worse. Research about coming out, as described in chapters two and five, suggests that homophobic abuse, violence, rejection and expulsion are not uncommon reactions from family members (D'Augelli *et al.*, 1998; Rivers and D'Augelli 2001; Floyd *et al.*, 1999; Gorman-Murray 2008). Although I have problematised this dominant cultural script by indicating that the majority of my participants had a positive experience of coming out to their siblings, there were nonetheless a small number of LGB participants who described disclosure creating distance or breakdown in their sibling connections. In this section, I map the stories of these participants.

### *Breakdown*

Molly indicated that coming out had a detrimental impact on the relationship that she had with her older brother and younger sister, leading to a complete breakdown in their bonds. Prior to coming out, Molly described having 'very, very close relationships' with her siblings. As they were growing up her brother was a strong 'role model' for Molly. She looked up to him and enjoyed emulating his academic interests. They spent a great deal of time together, talking and debating about the things they were passionate about. Molly also described having a close relationship with her sister. Their closeness was characterised by practices of play and plenty of 'chatter'.

We were play mates you know and we would walk to school together because our primary school was just up the road from where we lived and um we used to lie in bed talking and you know, mum would have to yell at us, 'it's time to go to sleep girls' (Molly)

Molly felt that part of the close connection she had with her siblings was created through their shared experience of belonging to a family that she defined as 'dysfunctional'. Molly's described her father as a functioning alcoholic and her mother as emotionally and verbally abusive towards them. Molly recalled

working hard with her siblings to create a 'tight knit closed world', a bubble of safety and protection as a way of managing this 'dysfunctional' family dynamic. Despite this sense of sibling solidarity, Molly indicated that the disclosure and performance of her lesbian sexuality was a marked point of transition in her close sibling connections. Her sister, although not necessarily surprised when Molly came out, was dismissive and hurtful, constructing her as some kind of a 'weirdo'. After she came out Molly felt that her sister started to withdraw and distance herself because she was 'uncomfortable' and 'ashamed' of who she was. Molly felt that part of her sister's embarrassment related to the performance of her 'queer' gender identity, in which Molly sported a crew cut hair style and started to copy the clothing style of James Dean<sup>54</sup>. Molly's brother was also openly hostile when she told him about her sexuality, reacting with shock anger and disgust.

[My brother] just stopped cold in his tracks, he was putting something in the closet and he just froze and he turned around and it was completely, it was way worse than my parents it was awful. He said really awful things to me that I have kind of blocked out, but I remember him saying you know 'you are my sister and I love you but I don't approve of this and I don't want my children exposed to this sort of thing', which at the time I was like you don't even have a girlfriend, where are these imaginary vulnerable children coming from? I didn't think that he would react quite so (pause) I guess in such a shocked and appalled way (Molly)

As indicated here, Molly's brother demonstrated his disgust of her sexuality by reinforcing fears of contagion for his imagined 'innocent' children (as explored in chapter four), and his moral objection to non-heterosexuality. Given their prior close connection this reaction evoked emotional distress for Molly.

You know he was somebody who I could talk to about things like history and philosophy and stuff and I didn't have many people I could connect to on that level and he was one of them. So um it was really upsetting (Molly)


Molly's distress and frustration amplified when her brother refused to accept the reality of her sexuality and worked hard to pretend like she had never come out; 'he seemed to pretend it wasn't happening... so he would keep talking to me like this whole event had never happened'. Valentine *et al* (2003)


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<sup>54</sup> James Dean was an American actor, who became an iconic figure for teenage dissolution and rebellion. His notorious style included a black leather jacket (collar up), freshly pressed white t-shirt, jeans and black working boots.

highlight similar experiences with parents, demonstrating how they appeared to be in denial, refusing to acknowledge their LGB children, and working to 'desexualise' their children's same-sex relationships (p. 494) (see also Nordquist and Smart 2014). Valentine *et al* (2003) refer to this as the 'paradoxical space' LGBs occupy in the family, being 'simultaneously 'out' and in the closet' (p. 494). As a consequence of her sister's shame and her brother's refusal to acknowledge her sexuality, Molly withdrew herself from their connection. She stopped seeing or talking to her siblings and their prior sense of belonging was lost. 'Coming out pretty much destroyed my relationships with my siblings' (Molly).

Molly recalled the 'profound impact' that this sibling rejection had upon her life, talking about her continued struggles with depression and anxiety; 'it was such a head fuck. I was really, I was so depressed'. A look at Molly's complete brother sibling sticker chart (fig. 6.6) shows how the coming out process created this negative affective change in their relationship. Before coming out, Molly used two positive emoticons to represent the close, 'intellectually stimulating', and protective relationship that they had. Yet in the 'during' and 'after coming out' sections, Molly charted mostly negative stickers to show the transition and breakdown in their sibling bond. Molly also drew upon powerful language like disappointment, anger, suspicion, resignation, failure, and hope to evoke the range of emotions that she experienced at these times.


 miss my old brother,  
our old relationship  
feel as if I have somehow failed


 angry that he  
didn't help  
resignation





**Sibling Sticker Chart: Older Brother**

1. Age of older brother now: 34    2. Age gap between you and your brother: 5 years

 irritation, disappointment  
annoying  
hoping things could improve, not expecting it





 angry that he can't be honest with me - suspicious


 don't like him much either  
doesn't take anything seriously

**Sibling Relationships After Coming Out**

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 very worried about his approval


 angry at his reaction,  
at his refusal to acknowledge  
my feelings

 Sadness that I've lost our  
relationship, that he isn't  
who I thought he was

**Sibling Relationships During Coming Out**

---

 very close, comforting, fun, intellectually  
stimulating, role model, looked up to him

 hoped he could make things  
better

**Sibling Relationships Before Coming Out**

---




key:  = Positive Experiences/ Relationships     = Challenging Experiences/ Relationships     = Negative Experiences/ Relationships

Figure 6.7 Molly - Sibling Sticker Chart

For Molly, there was also a sense of permanency to the breakdown in her sibling relationships. She talked of emotionally and physically (i.e. moving 4,000 miles) distancing herself from her siblings (and her parents), and having no interest in trying to repair their connections in the future as a literal way of 'saving her life':

I have gone from seeing my siblings as my comrades; we all banded together to protect each other against the whole parental bull shit, but now they are part of the problem, they are adversaries and um it is like I had to choose between myself and my family and if I [had] chose my family I would have died, either very slowly or I would of just, you know probably committed suicide [Sarah: Mmm] so it is kind of like a bargain I have had to strike, if I wanted to save my life I had to trade all this stuff. I had to trade having a family and economic security and a certain amount of social approval, my entire background. You know my whole cultural background is something that I can't ever get back (Molly)

As demonstrated here for Molly, the disclosure of her sexuality negatively impacted upon many aspects of her life and her identity. The 'trade' for putting her own safety and happiness first by coming out, meant that she lost the connection with her siblings and her parents, but also her sense of security and cultural identity.

What was particularly interesting about Molly's story, was how she attributed the breakdown in her sibling relationships to a shift in the position she held in the family. As indicated in chapter two, existing research has suggested that it is not uncommon for sibling identifications to change in response to shifts in family or sibling dynamics (Dunn, 2008; Edwards *et al.*, 2006; Mauthner 2005). For example, Mauthner's (2005) work on sistering shows how certain life events like acquiring or losing boyfriends or girlfriends, leaving home, and becoming a mother, can influence and alter the shape of sistering over time. What is interesting about Molly's story is that it was not just her position that changed when she came out, but her siblings' positions that shifted too.

As noted in chapter two, there has been a great deal of research focusing on the different roles that children occupy within the family. Edwards *et al* (2006) suggest that when talking about sibling relationships, children often compare themselves to their brothers and sisters. 'Whether we are the same as or different from others is the language often used to think about and express significant

questions of connections with others' (Edwards *et al.*, 2006 p. 38). They suggest that sameness and difference are two of the notions that children draw upon to describe their own sense of selves 'notions that are closely tied up with feelings about individuality and being part of a group, belonging, connection, separation, dependence, and interdependence' (Edwards *et al.*, 2006 p. 38). Sanders (2004) also suggests that one of the themes in the polarisation of sibling relationships is how certain features of sibling characteristics are relationally compared to provide contrast. This is a process Sulloway (1996) describes as 'niche picking' (p. 96), or Tannen (2008) as 'culturally established dualities' (p. 211). These relational comparisons of sameness and difference were strongly evident in the participant stories. Clear distinctions were made between different (and sometimes similar) genders, birth order, age, personalities, appearances, and interests. Descriptions such as; 'the good one' (Molly), 'the black sheep' (Jen), 'the director' (Andy), 'the girly girl' (Miss G), 'the protector' (Georgina), 'the wild child' (Tara), and 'the home maker' (Heather), were used to illustrate relational sibling identities and positions held in the family.

Molly was one of the participants who put great emphasis upon her relational identity and the specific position that she occupied within her family. As a 'middle kid', Molly talked about the privilege and responsibility of being both an older and a younger sister (see, also Punch 2007 on middle siblings). Molly described the pleasure of having a close older brother whom she 'looked up to', learnt from and 'hero worshiped'. Yet Molly also reinforced the importance of her position as an older sister, and her desire to teach and protect her sister from harm. As well as the position as a middle sibling, Molly also talked about her role as the primary 'caretaker' in her family. Within their 'dysfunctional' family dynamic, Molly indicated that she had a great deal of responsibility to prevent and manage conflict and to care for her parents and siblings:

I have been the caretaker for my parents my whole life. It was my job to make sure my sister wasn't annoying my mother, make sure my dad wasn't being too drunk, make sure my brother wasn't fighting with my sister...I was the good girl, the favourite child because of course my job was to look after mum and dad...That was my job in the family (Molly)

Molly recalled how hard it was to bear the weight of responsibility to manage her family in this way and how this prevented her from leading a 'normal' childhood. Yet Molly also talked about how her position as the 'caretaker' afforded her the status as the favourite, good child in the eyes of her parents. In

coming out however, Molly's role shifted. The disclosure of her sexuality in a family that maintained a silence around sex and sexuality (much like the families characterised in the second model, in chapter four) and who constructed 'homosexuality' as immoral and inappropriate (i.e. part of their families 'outer limits'), Molly lost her privileged status.

I think that the problem was that my role in the family had changed. I couldn't be the good one anymore. I couldn't fulfil these caretaking needs that my parents had relied upon...because you know I had fallen from grace essentially. You know, I had become the one thing that was unthinkable (Molly)

Molly draws upon the figurative Christian concept of falling from grace<sup>55</sup> to signal how in coming out, she had lost the approval of her parents and siblings, as well as her status and standing as 'the good sibling'. Molly experienced a shift in her sibling position. She became labelled as the disreputable and shameful member of the family; what Molly described as the 'the black sheep' and as someone who no longer fitted into the family's 'charmed circle' (Rubin 1984). Interestingly, through her experience of coming out Molly also felt that her siblings experienced a shift in the way they were positioned.

My sister has become the good one...she is not the scapegoat anymore. She used to be the one that got all the shit and now that I am the black sheep she is getting a lot more parental approval (Molly)

Molly suggests that her siblings were afforded 'increased value and status' in the family by her coming out and her sister, in particular, was able to move into Molly's position as the good, favourite child who cared for her parents. This shift reinforces Edwards *et al's* (2006) assertion that sibling identities are not fixed, but rather can change and be negotiated over time (see also Mauthner 2005). Moreover, Molly indicated that disclosure did not just effect her position as caretaker, but it also impacted upon her identity as a 'good older sister'. Molly described how her sexuality and her experimentation with a 'queer' gender identity, which she terms her 'baby butch phase' prevented her from fulfilling her role as an older sister:

I think it is the older sister's job in the family to kind of help teach the younger sister how to be girly you know, you learn from your older sister how to put on makeup, how

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<sup>55</sup> In a literal sense, falling from grace means to sin and to lose the approval and protection of god.

to date boys and what to do when you get your period and that didn't happen with us...and part of it was the fact that I had nothing to teach her. You know femininity was this thing I was terrible at. I just couldn't do it. I didn't want to do it (Molly)

Drawing upon the culturally normative idea that older siblings play a significant role in teaching their younger brothers and sisters and contributing to their development (Brody 2004), here Molly is articulating a sense of guilt for lacking (and objecting to) the heteronormative expertise to help and advise her sister when faced with important gendered milestones. Molly felt that she had somehow 'failed' to achieve her role as an older sister by resisting a normative feminine identity (e.g. by not dressing girly, being pretty, passive, or dating boys), and this was something that she felt created distance in their sister relationship.

Louis was the other participant who experienced a similar distancing and separation from his brothers as a consequence of coming out. In contrast to Molly however, the change in Louis's sibling relationships were more subtle. As briefly touched upon in chapter five, Louis had distant and hostile relationships with his brothers when they were growing up. He gave a powerful description of their relationship in his diary:

Our relationships were never really positive; we used to argue frequently...and I think that even as a young boy I never really felt I related to them; I looked at them with foreign eyes; unfamiliar glances that were also reciprocated with equal measures of contempt (Louis Diary Week Two)

Louis felt that a significant part of this hostility and contempt arose from his lack, of what he called 'hyper-masculinity', which was embodied and performed by his brothers. Louis talked about growing up in a small post-industrial, working class community, which was dominated by an ever-present 'mentality of masculinity'.

I was surrounded by this masculinity everywhere, [where you have to be] just very macho, you need to go out with girls, shag as many as you can, you can't be effeminate or you can't display feminine traits um and if you were, you were targeted and you were ostracised and stuff because you weren't falling in line with normality. But it was, I think because of the community we were from there was



very high unemployment and all of the boys used to go home and drink and smoke and do all these things and hang around in bus stops and stuff and you know just really quite intimidating, but it was made known that if you weren't butch and masculine and grrr (laughing) then you would have problems (Louis)

Research has suggested that the conditions of industrialised communities, like the one described by Louis here, demands a particular type of strong, stoic and skilled masculinity (see, for example, Walkerdine and Jimenez 2012; Willis 1977). Louis's fierce resistance towards this type of masculinity and the performance of his own 'camp and very feminine' identity in this community, was one of the defining 'problems' in his lack of connection to his brothers.

Thinking on it, I think that my brothers' hyper-masculinity was probably the biggest problem – I felt threatened by them, inferior and I suppose not comfortable being around them (Louis Diary Week Two).

For Louis, the disclosure of his sexuality heightened the negative and distant connections that he had with his two brothers. As indicated in the previous chapter, one of Louis's brothers rejected him when he learnt about his sexuality, and the consequence of this was a completed breakdown in their relationship; 'I don't talk to him at all actually'. This breakdown was evident in one of the stories Louis told about bumping into his brother in a local supermarket:

**Louis:** I went home the other day and we went to Tesco and [my brother] was walking down an aisle and he saw me and he turned up another one so he could not have to cross me. Again that was weird, I had my brother and sister-in-law in the same supermarket but we were conscious of avoiding each other

**Sarah:** What did that feel like?

**Louis:** (pause) weird, very awkward and sad, yeah, yeah weird.

Louis also described the relationship with his other brother as extremely distant. He had little interest in keeping in contact or building a relationship with him after he came out. Although Louis acknowledged that he did see his brother from time to time at family events, the non-acceptance of his sexuality and their distant relationship meant that he 'felt like a stranger', rather than a brother. In comparison to

Molly, this breakdown in his relationships did not have such a powerful negative impact on Louis. Although Louis indicated it was 'sad', he nevertheless stated that; 'the absence of my brothers [from my life] doesn't concern me at all' (Diary Week One), as he had never had a close connection with them at any point in his life.

### *Rupture and Rebuild*

In chapter five, I showed that for many of the heterosexual siblings learning that they had an LGB brother or sister was emotive and instigated feelings of happiness and joy for some, and disappointment and anger for others. Filius was one gay man that recalled how coming out caused an initial crisis in the relationship with his sister. As I go on to show here, it ruptured their close and meaningful connection. However, Filius's story also reinforces the significance of time, by indicating how reactions to sexuality can change and how sibling relationships can be rebuilt over time.

Filius told a similar story to Molly, in indicating that before coming out he had a very close relationship with his younger sister, Dana. Filius used the term 'BFF' (best friends forever) to signify their bond, which was characterised by intimacy, trust, and solidarity. It was a sibling connection established through spending most of their time together, having fun, watching films, going shopping, and confiding in each other about the important and mundane aspects of their lives.

We were like each other's main friend. Yeah like, we had other friends outside of it, but we would spend more time together than with a lot of our friends cos we acted very much like a, kind of like, a very siblingy [sic] unit (Filius)

In his interview and his sibling sticker chart (see figure 6.8) Filius noted that their bond was not necessarily perfect, and he mapped a challenging emoticon in reference to his sister's jealousy when he made new friends and a negative sticker for his sister's 'tantrums' to get her own way. With that being said, for Filius the relationship with his sister was the most important and meaningful in his life. Similar to Molly, Filius indicated that this sense of unity and connectedness in their sibling connection was also a result of having two parents who struggled with a drug addiction. Growing up in what Filius called a 'chaotic' family environment meant that he cared for, and protected his sister from harm. Filius talked about shielding his little sister from the 'interesting people' (i.e. other drug users) that entered their house and taking on the responsibility of getting himself and his sister to school as his parents were not

able to look after them in this way. Filius felt that facing these problems, largely on their own, cemented the close connection that they created 'I think it was the fact that all the shitty stuff that was going on [at home] that we just bonded together. Yeah we kind of defended against the world'.

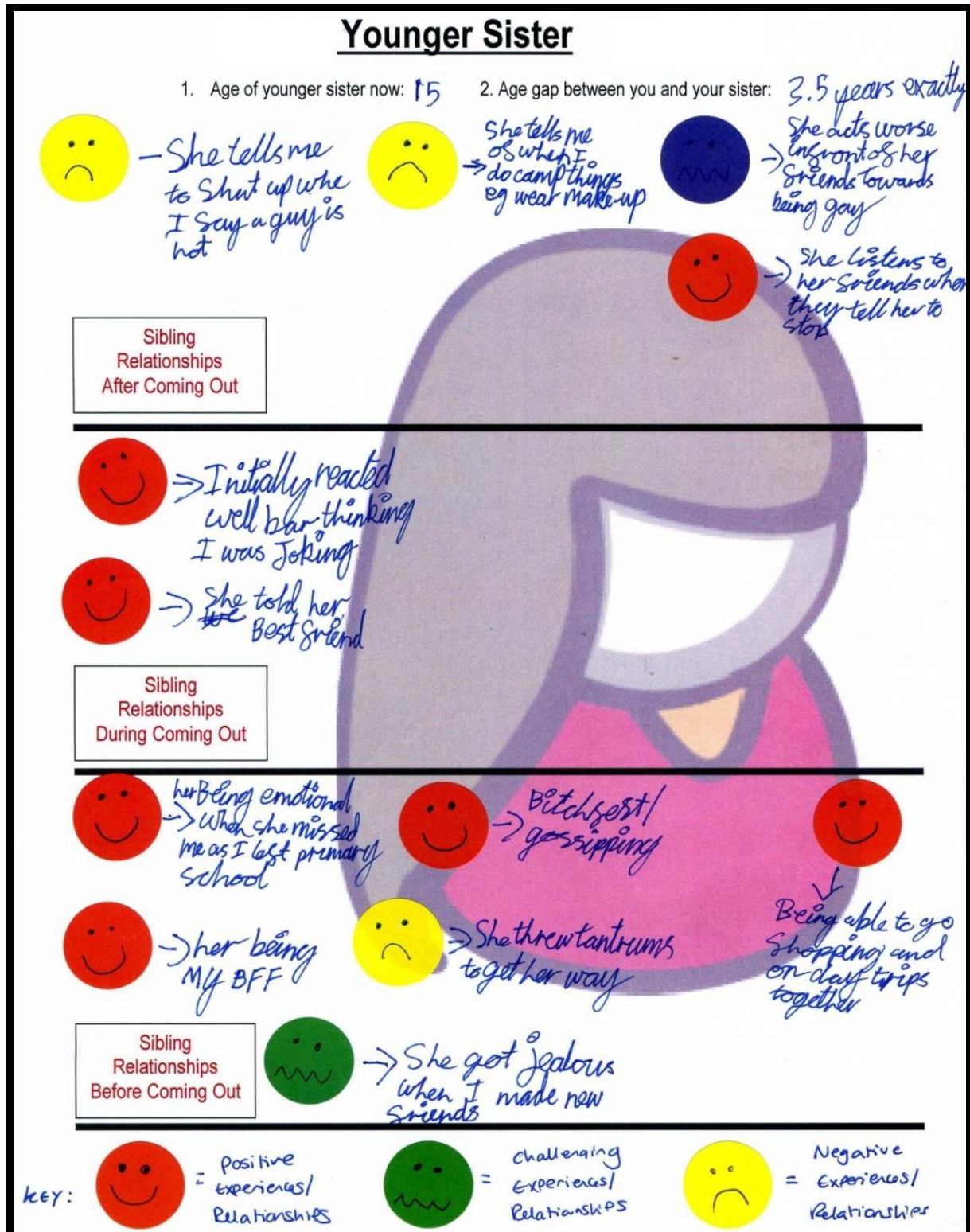


Figure 6.8 Filius: Sibling Sticker Chart

Although Sanders (2004) recognises that there is very little written about parental neglect and the impact on sibling relationships, Bryant and Crockenberg (1980) suggest that when parents are less emotionally available, siblings often respond by becoming more responsible and nurturing towards each other, which Filius alludes to in the connection with his sister.

However, similarly to Molly and Louis, disclosure represented a significant transition in the relationship that Filius had with his sister. Filius was pleasantly surprised when his sister appeared to be initially accepting of his sexuality, saying; 'oh don't worry we all know anyway', but he noted how their relationship quickly deteriorated. He talked of Dana distancing herself, as she struggled to understand or to deal with having an 'abnormal' brother. She stopped confiding in him and refused to interact with him as she used to.

She wouldn't want to spend any time with me at all yeah and whenever I would bring up anything about being gay she was very, she was disgusted (Filius)

Conflict became one of their everyday sibling practices, with arguments and fights sparked by Dana's repugnance of Filius's engagement in 'stereotypical gay things, [like] talking about guys a lot, wearing make-up, and being feminine'. Part of their conflict also stemmed from Dana's insistence that he kept his sexuality a secret from their friends, especially while they were still attending school. Filius felt that she was worried about being vulnerable to stigma and marginalisation by association losing her 'popular' reputation in school (Goffman 1983). Coming out destroyed the close relationship that Filius had with his sister. He was hurt and frustrated by Dana's response to his sexuality and he eventually gave up trying to hang on to the intimate connectedness he once had with her.

Me and my sister used to be BFF's, and then she found out I was gay and then it kind of went downhill from there...I then got frustrated and it led to me not trying as much I think. Yeah and at which point everything just fell apart (Filius)

However, just as research with parents suggests that many learnt to manage, cope, and accept their LGB children over time (Herdt and Koff 2000; Phillips and Ancis 2008; Salzburg 2004), Filius also indicated that the relationship with his sister did eventually improve. After being out for just over two years, Filius started to feel another shift in their sibling relationship. He felt that Dana had matured and

was more able to accept and understand his sexuality. This meant that they began to work on rebuilding their bond.

She is coming to terms with it now, slowly but surely, and I am starting to see my sister more frequently yeah um starting to interact with her. Although I used to interact with her a bit more anyway, so like actually spending time doing stuff, like watching the Harry Potter films, and I am hoping that, you know, at some point there will be more time where we used to do stuff together, where we will go back to going shopping together yeah...I think [our relationship] is getting closer again... I can see that closeness coming back (Filius)

It is important to note that Filius was not making the same distinction as Georgina (in the previous section); in that he was not suggesting that his sibling connection had actually improved and become stronger after he came out. Rather what he illustrated here was that their relationship started to mend over time. Progression was slow and difficult, but their sibling relationship had started to 'normalise' and get closer again. Although their bond was still lacking the sense of intimacy and closeness that they once shared, Filius nonetheless felt hope and a desire for their relationship to improve in the future: 'I really want my sister to be close with me again'. Filius's story points towards the importance of investigating the negotiation of gender and sexuality over time and not just at the moment of initial disclosure between siblings, as so much of the existing research has done. In taking account of these changes over time, I suggest that it is possible to see stories of recovery, not just loss.

## Conclusion

This chapter has focused upon my third and final research question, by examining the extent to which disclosure of LGB sexualities impacts upon, changes, and evolves the relationships between LGBs and their heterosexual siblings. I began this chapter by indicating that existing research has tended to focus heavily upon *initial* responses to disclosure, and how families (i.e. mostly parents) can react with feelings of shock, anger, sadness, rejection, and in some cases acceptance (Savin-Williams and Dube 1998). I argued that less attention has been given to the ways in which families respond to disclosure over time, and how their everyday dynamics and practices can shift and develop as a result of non-heterosexuality (Baptist and Allen 2008; Beeler and DiProva 1999; Hilton and Szymanski 2011). In accounting for the changes to the sibling relationship over time (i.e. before, during and after coming out), I have shown that the interconnections between brothers and sister can be profoundly affected by the

disclosure of LGB sexuality, either for the better or for the worse. In demonstrating how disclosure can instigate new ways of 'doing' and 'being' siblings, this chapter has emphasised the importance of considering the role of brothers and sisters in the coming out story.

Participant stories of sibling change, post-disclosure were largely positive, with heterosexual and LGB participants suggesting that their relationships strengthened and became closer. A significant part of these changes, was a transformation in mundane, every day sibling practices. For siblings like Marshall and Audrey, disclosure was constructed as something that enhanced their capability to talk and interact with one another more openly and honestly, creating a sense of transparency and togetherness in their bond. Likewise, for Silvia and Bruce, the coming out process fostered important elements of care, protection and support in their previously distant relationship. What was clear in these stories was that disclosure did not create perfect relationships where LGB and heterosexual siblings got along all of time or agreed on everything, as demonstrated by Angel-Paul. However, what coming out did do was foster a renewed sense of security in these sibling bonds. Practices of talk, interaction and care were understood to be illustrations of commitment and of knowing that siblings were there no matter what. These stories show how the picture of people as selfish individuals (see Bauman 2003; Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Giddens 1992), does not capture what Williams (2004) calls 'the moral texture' (p. 41) of contemporary family living, nor the lengths that siblings go to in order to maintain and develop their meaningful connections. These sibling stories of love, resistance, and strength work to trouble the discourse of negativity that I argue has been entrenched in family coming out stories.

With that being said, there were a small number of participants who indicated that coming out and being out changed their sibling dynamics in detrimental ways. For Molly, Louis, and Filius the presence of their sexuality instigated a breakdown or fracture in their sibling relationships. These stories were framed around a loss of closeness, and a lack of talk and care. While for Molly and Louis, the breakdown and distance in their sibling relationships were viewed as relatively permanent, for Filius, the sibling connection was rebuilt over time. In noting how sibling relationships can heal, Filius's account points to the importance of researching sibling lives in and throughout time. In doing, I suggest it is possible to see that even when initial disclosures can be difficult between siblings, causing a negative shift or break in their relationships, eventually over time non-heterosexuality can be accepted and sibling relationships can start to be rebuilt or redefined. These types of stories show how some sibling ties can be delicate and require careful management if they are going to be rebuilt and improved over time.

The findings in this chapter allude to the vast diversity in experiences that LGB individuals had with their heterosexual siblings after coming out, emphasising the complex and fluid nature of siblings bonds. Taking account of both the better, and the worse, it is possible to see that for the majority of participants coming out enhanced their connections with one another. What this tells us is that there is a powerful link between disclosure and the improvements in sibling relationships, representing a marked departure from the experiences of deterioration and breakdown, so commonly associated with the coming out process (Beeler and DiProva 1999). The findings from this chapter call for greater demands to look through generations, interdependencies and through time in order to account for the rich diversity in the sibling and family coming out story.

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Conclusion**

#### **Introduction**

The starting point for this thesis was to ask questions about what happens to the relationships between LGB and heterosexual siblings when non-heterosexuality is disclosed. The rationale for this research arose from a desire to explore the marginalised experiences of siblings in traditional family coming out stories, and to question the types of stories being told in light of the transformed social, political, legislative and moral climates for LGBs in contemporary western society. Drawing upon a qualitative mixed methods research design, the aim of this project was to develop a greater understanding of the significance and meaning of the coming out process and how non-heterosexualities were expressed, managed and negotiated in the everyday practices between siblings. In so doing, I hoped that this thesis would contribute towards bridging the gap that Gabb (2011) identified between studies of sexuality and scholarship on family life, nudging forward understandings of how sexuality actually functions within relational families (Gabb 2011).

In this final chapter, I revisit and address the research questions drawing out the main themes that have been presented throughout the stories told in this thesis. I also assess the design and implementation of a qualitative mixed methods approach and consider how successful these methods were in presenting the relational stories of siblings. I consider some of the limitations of this research, making suggestions about what could have been done differently, as well as presenting my ideas for further research in this area. This chapter concludes with a discussion about the empirical and conceptual contributions this thesis makes to knowledge about everyday family life, sibling relationships, and practices of sexuality in these contexts.

#### **Section One: Dominant Research Themes**

The central question that I aimed to address was 'how do LGBs and their heterosexual siblings experience the coming out process in the context of families, and what impact does this process have upon the relationships between siblings?'. In addressing this overarching aim, a number of specific sub-questions were also explored:



1. In what ways is the coming out process managed and strategized between LGB and heterosexual siblings?
2. How is disclosure of non-heterosexuality initially experienced between LGB and heterosexual siblings?
3. In what ways does disclosure impact upon, change, and evolve the structure of relationships, identities and everyday practices between LGB and heterosexual siblings over time?

In answering my main and subsequent research questions, three key arguments arose from the sibling stories that were told and retold throughout this thesis. These themes are drawn together and addressed below.

### *Siblings Matter*

Given the stories of fear, rejection, and victimisation that have dominated the accounts of coming out within families, it is perhaps not surprising to discover that some of the participants in this study chose to hide their sexualities from their siblings for some time. One of the most interesting and striking themes that emerged from some of the participants' stories, was that the decisions to conceal sexualities were often not related to personal concerns about rejection, but rather they were linked to, and in webs of, complex relationships with parents and significant others. In an era of individualization where there is a demand on the pursuit of individual freedom and happiness (Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Giddens 1992), Valentine *et al* (2003) indicate that processes of disclosure have been implicitly framed as an individual decision, with consequences for the individual who is coming out. Throughout this thesis, the participants' stories have shown how this conceptualisation fails to account for the complex and multiple ways in which sexuality was meshed within other significant social relations. This was most evident in chapter four, where I drew attention to the role that some parents played in the regulation of LGB sexualities between siblings.

In families where parents held hostile views towards non-heterosexuality, parents often placed pressures on their LGB children to regulate and hide their sexualities from their heterosexual siblings, often justified as a way of protecting younger family members from the 'threat' or allure of LGB

sexualities. The integrated LGB and heterosexual participant stories revealed some of the damaging consequences that sexual secrets and lies had, not just upon individuals, but on the family as a collective. For example, Marshall's struggle with depression and suicidal tendencies was an all too familiar story of the devastating pains of having to 'pass' as someone he was not in the context of his family. The Symonds sister's accounts also show how tension can arise between parents who have different views about regulating LGB sexualities in families, and Marshall and Audrey's story illustrates how keeping certain family members hidden from the knowledge of sexuality, creates awkward and burdensome positions for the family members who have to work at keeping sexual secrets (Smart 2007). An interesting and repetitive theme among these stories of regulation was how LGB individuals acceded to their parental wishes to keep their sexualities hidden from their siblings, despite how hard this was or how much they disagreed with the decision. I have suggested that these decisions about regulation were made in relation to understandings of the right thing to do in families and represented ongoing commitments to sustaining a position within the family.

These findings have highlighted some of the tensions and difficulties of being both an individual with personal hopes, needs and desires, and one of a collective group with responsibilities, commitments and obligations towards doing the right thing in the family (Finch and Mason 1993; Williams 2004). While the stories told show that LGB individuals do pursue their own independent identity constructions, what appeared to matter above everything else were family connectedness, belonging and a commitment to doing the right thing however difficult this was in practice. This tells us that the process of coming out and the performance of sexual identities in the family, is not an individual choice located in the pursuit of personal happiness, but is a process only possible in a relational sense. Despite the perceived hazards of individualisation, what these findings suggest is that sibling and family relationships do matter for LGBs. Indeed, they matter so much that some LGB individuals sacrifice their own identities, happiness and wellbeing, just to sustain a place in their families of origin. Accounts from many of the heterosexual siblings also revealed how they worked through or pushed aside difficult emotions - like Aubrey's disappointment at not being a '*blood aunty*' - and perceptions of LGB sexualities in order to maintain the relationships with their siblings. These findings demonstrate the strength of sibling and family ties and the profound meanings that are attached to these relationships, before, during and after the process of coming out.

I suggest that these findings are important in a context where, too often, the significance of siblings has been made marginalised in accounts of coming out, and where LGBs are assumed to be disconnected

from their families of origin (Weston 1991). While I certainly do not wish to deny the prevalence of families of choice (Weeks *et al.*, 2001; Weston 1991) or undervalue the diverse and wonderful ways in which people create meaningful intimate relationships with a range of significant others, I nonetheless think it is important to recognise that some LGBs are still tied up in their families of origin and that the decisions made about how they come out, and how they express their identities, are made in relation to these connections. Therefore, in order to fully understand how LGBs live and negotiate their lives within their families or origin, it is important to situate coming out experiences in wider family interrelationships (Nordquist and Smart 2014; Valentine *et al.*, 2003). It is only then can we begin to get a sense of what it means to come out and live openly in the complex worlds of sibling and family.

### *Old Stories Told in New Ways?*

The story of coming out has been told and retold in modern society (Plummer 1995). One of the arguments I make throughout this thesis is that there has been a persuasive and dominant account of negativity in the stories about coming out to families. I suggest this is demonstrated by the concerns that LGBs have about disclosing and the accounts of rejection by parents and LGBs alike. In his work on sexual stories, Plummer (1995) identifies this theme of hardship and suffering in stores of coming out (and also in experiences of rape and recovery).

One major pattern has proliferated and developed most rapidly in the latter part of the twentieth century. These are the stories of sexual suffering, surviving and surpassing...like all good stories – they have been replayed, copied and borrowed over and over again. They are a story of our time (Plummer 1995 p. 49).

While acknowledging the prevalence of suffering in the sexual stories that have been told about coming out, Plummer (1995) also notes that ‘they may now – at century’s end – have started to become somewhat ‘tired’ or clichéd; and new story way may well be in the making’ (p. 49). Although there is still an element of ‘trouble’ and difficulty in the more recent academic work on coming out as told by Nordquist and Smart (2014) and Valentine *et al* (2003), for example, accounts of love, support and acceptance are also starting to appear in the narratives of family disclosure.

In this thesis there is clear evidence that some siblings do experience worry and fear about coming out, like Monkey and Angel-Paul, and are confronted with discriminatory attitudes and behaviours from their siblings and parents, like Molly and Louis. However, these stories represent a small segment of the research population. What I have shown throughout this thesis is a more nuanced, contradictory and complex account of coming out to siblings than portrayed in the majority of disclosure literature. The enchanting stories that have been told throughout this thesis have revealed the powerful, ambiguous, and dynamic nature of the sibling bond and the experience of coming out. Consider Dragon's frustration at having to keep his sexuality a secret; the breakdown of Louis's relationship with his brothers; and the delight of Anne in seeing her sister so free and happy after she came out; but also Charlotte's anger at her mother for keeping the secret of her sister's sexuality for so long; the ambivalence of Jen's brother when she told him she was gay; Aubrey's disappointment that she would never be a blood aunty; and the strengthening of the sibling bond between Marshall and Audrey. These are stories of regulation, anxiety, trouble and loss, but also of love, support, commitment and hope. They are stories that illustrate the function of sexuality in families and the joys and difficulties encountered as new identities, new practices, and new relationships are negotiated between siblings.

In order to account for contemporary coming out experiences, I suggest that we need to step away from the idea of disclosure as a single point of crisis or rejection, as these concepts are too narrow and linear. Instead, we need to focus on the reasons why people react in the way that they do and how these emotions are often linked to our understanding of the family and our relational connections to others. In doing so, we can gain a better understanding of simultaneously positive and negative emotions such as happiness and disappointment and account for new and more diverse coming out stories.

### *Timely Tales*

Influential sociologists such as Ken Plummer (1995) and Jeffrey Weeks (2000; 2007) emphasise the importance of situating experiences of disclosure as stories in time, which are told in particular ways in particular historical contexts. Certain stories told throughout this thesis, like Jen's for example, recognise the importance of accounting for historical time in making sense of sibling experiences of disclosure. Jen positions her brother's positive and nonchalant 'no big deal' attitude in relation to the transformation of intimacy which has arguably impacted upon the increasingly liberal attitudes towards LGBs. Throughout this thesis (and most explicitly in chapter six) there is also evidence to suggest that it

is important to consider the coming out experience in sibling dynamics over time and throughout the entire generational span of the sibling relationship.

As indicated in chapter two, there has been a great deal of research into coming out experiences since the beginnings of the gay liberation movement. The majority of this work has, however, focused on the initial patterns and responses to disclosure (Baptist and Allen 2008). As previously suggested attention to initial parental reactions often paints a bleak picture of LGB lives, one that is grounded in victimisation and rejection (Savin-Williams 2001). In chapter five, I argued that the initial affective responses are very important in siblings relationships because they can tell us a lot about the way sexuality is performed and negotiated in families, but also how emotions about LGB sexuality are intrinsically linked to relationships with significant others. However, although important, these initial responses only represent one story about disclosure, about things that were said or felt in the heat of the coming out moment. The tales told in this thesis point towards new stories that emerge from families when we start to pay attention to the perception and performance of sexuality over time. These are still stories about fracture and breakdown, but they are also about reform, commitment and love.

One of the important themes that arose within the participant data sets was the way that coming out changed the structure and form of relational connections between siblings over time. For most participants, this shift was experienced positively with disclosure opening up new ways of relating that strengthened and brought LGB and heterosexual siblings closer together as a unit. The stories of Marshall and Audrey, for example, demonstrated how disclosure instigated a transformation in their everyday practices of talk, care and activity, creating more pronounced feelings of togetherness and belonging. However, other participants' stories indicated that the disclosure of non-heterosexuality represented a negative point of transition for sibling relationships, causing temporary distance or a complete breakdown in connections. Molly's story revealed how her sexuality 'destroyed' her sibling relationships and led to her to emotional and physical withdraw from her siblings. Filius told of similar difficulties in the relationship with his sister at the point of disclosure, but also spoke of relationships that can get better over time, with greater understandings of sexualities and a commitment to rebuilding the bond that was once valued and shared.

The stories told throughout this thesis have constituted a significant reminder that siblings and families are fluid and dynamic units and are subject to change over time. I conclude that, for most, coming out

and being out does impact upon and change sibling dynamics in quite profound ways. One of the emerging themes that has run throughout this thesis is one of LGBs being embraced within a sibling context, with heterosexual brothers and sisters demonstrating values of acceptance, love, care, commitment and support. That is not to say that all heterosexual siblings responded in a positive way, but rather that relationships between LGB and heterosexual siblings, like Georgina and Henry are carefully worked out, rebuilt, and redefined. Contrary to the dominant view of rejection, I suggest that for most, coming out has the potential to actually bring siblings closer together, through practices of talk, care, and reciprocity which ultimately strengthens their relationships.

## **Section Two: Evaluating Qualitative Mixed Methods**

As detailed in chapter three, my decision to incorporate a qualitative mixed methods research design reflected a desire to piece together a dynamic and multidimensional account of how the disclosure of non-heterosexuality impacts upon the ways that sibling relationships are experienced, understood, changed and valued. Each individual method used had its own value, particularly as different methods offered different types of data and different snapshots of coming out experiences within sibling relationships. In-depth semi-structured interviewing provided participants with enough flexibility to tell and reflect upon their rich, fascinating and diverse stories of sibling interaction, sibling negotiation, and sibling change. They were enjoyable for most of them, and the interviews took many different forms, in terms of length and what was discussed. Sibling Sticker Charts, which I designed to capture and locate affect in sibling interactions, before, during and after coming out, proved to be a useful method for exploring the range and depth of powerful relational and temporal emotions in processes of disclosure. These charts offered a more complex and detailed picture of coming out and the emotions that were linked to hopes and dreams and joys and disappointments about present and future relational connections to siblings and other family members. The post-interview solicited diaries added additional depth to the interview material, capturing everyday sibling interactions, and drew out points of inquiry that were particularly meaningful for the participants. Finally, debrief meetings offered an informal environment to reflect upon the issues discussed in the research, to consider participation, and to note any changes to sibling relationships since the interview. The debrief meetings were also useful for asking the participants to interpret their sibling sticker charts, enabling them to come to their own decisions about how coming out affected sibling relationships, and therefore aiding my analysis. During these meetings I was also able to show my appreciation to the participants for getting involved in my study and for being so enthusiastic about my research topic, with an abundance of coffee, cake and sometimes lunch.

However, as Gabb (2008) suggests a QMM approach weaving together a combination of these methods, adds another dimension to the analytical picture of family relationships. Integrated together the interviews, charts, diaries and debriefs provided a fascinating insight into the emotions, practices, meanings and functions of sexuality in LGB-heterosexual sibling relationships. It was a successful approach as it helped to reveal relational sibling connections and the 'messiness' (Gabb 2008) of coming out, managing and negotiating LGB sexualities with sibling and wider family dynamics. I found that the combination of qualitative participatory methods used over a relatively short period of time was also useful for keeping the participants engaged in the research, and for developing relationships with the participants, demonstrated by most remaining involved in the research until the fieldwork had been completed.

Were I able to undertake this research again, there are however several methodological additions or alterations I would make. First, I would build in a longitudinal qualitative research design. Qualitative longitudinal research seeks to investigate and interpret change over time in social context (Holland *et al.*, 2006). Longitudinal research designs have been argued to bring a fresh perspective into social inquiry, as looking at time and chronology offers the possibility of interpreting how change is experienced and acted upon by different individuals and groups (Holland *et al.*, 2006). It has been suggested that longitudinal research is particularly important for studying family life and personal relationships and for making sense of, and challenging the processes of change brought on by individualisation and detraditionalisation (Holland *et al.*, 2006). The methods I used in this study, already pointed towards some of the dramatic changes that occurred in sibling relationships and personal lives during and after the coming out process, as well as in the four week period between the interview and debrief meeting. Georgina's diary reflection on having split from her long-term girlfriend and Simon's debrief discussion about coming out to his sister during the process of research are just some examples of how personal relationships are fluid and subject to change over time. The value of incorporating temporality into the heart of my research, and doing repeated interviews with siblings over the period of a year (for example), would possibly offer a more detailed picture of some of the changes and continuity to sibling relationships and practices of sexuality within the paradigms of the family over time.

Second, as part of the longitudinal design, I would like to have interviewed LGB and heterosexual siblings together, at the same time. Doing so would possibly add an extra dimension to the research

and the analysis, particularly in terms of highlighting shared experiences, sibling interactions and tensions in the stories of disclosure. Interviewing LGB and heterosexual siblings together could have also eliminated some of the ethically challenging issues I faced with keeping sibling identities anonymous when working and presenting the data (as explored in chapter three). As Punch (2007) suggests, group interviews with siblings are useful as they enable brothers and sister to negotiate a shared research account where there is an awareness of what is being discussed in the context of the research. However, as Punch (2007) cautions, interviewing siblings together also elicits a number of ethical and management issues, such as power struggles between older and younger siblings, and the tendency for siblings to contradict one another. These are issues that would need to be carefully addressed in the collection of data.

Finally, knowing what I know now, I think it would have been interesting and beneficial to add a number of additional participatory methods to the research design. For example, I would have liked to have given each participant a digital camera and asked them to create photo diaries over a specified period of time. With a focus on the representation of day to day sibling relationships, i.e. what was important or relevant for their sibling connections and what every day practices they engaged (or did not engage) in, alongside spatial patterning of places of inclusion or exclusion around the home and local community, would have captured some interesting data on siblings events, times, interaction, representation, space and place. The value of incorporating photo diaries lies in participants' freedom to centre and construct their own social worlds bringing to the forefront what was important and relevant to them (Prosser and Loxley 2008), while providing a glimpse into 'parts of their lives that might not otherwise be visible' (Banks 2007 p. 78). Drawing methods could have also been a useful way of guiding the participants to frame their own siblings experiences and to produce data on the messy, complex and emotional relational connections to their siblings (Kearney and Hyle 2004), 'express[ing] that which is not easily put into words; the ineffable, the elusive, the not-yet-thought-through, the subconscious' (Weber and Mitchell 1995 p. 34).

### **Section Three: Limitations & Further Research**

Reaching the end of a project offers scope to reflect upon some of the limitations of the research, as well as considerations about directions for future research. As my research was specifically designed to present a snapshot of the coming out experiences of LGB and heterosexual siblings, my thesis relied solely upon the accounts of brothers and sisters. This focus on siblings meant that there were many other family members, like Dragon's parents, Jen's grandmother, or Angel-Paul's boyfriend who



featured in the stories told throughout this thesis, but who were not heard from directly. Many times during the data collection and analysis I was left wondering what stories these family members would have told about disclosure, and if they would have been different or similar to the stories of their LGB and heterosexual children, grandchildren and partners. Given that I have argued that the sibling coming out process is relational and tied up in understandings of, and commitments to wider family relationships, my main recommendation for building upon this thesis would be to integrate other family members in the coming out stories. I suggest that a case study approach, much like that advocated by Baptist and Allen (2008), with a rich array of qualitative mixed methods would offer a valuable opportunity to weave together stories from parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins and those defined as families of choice (Weeks *et al.*, 2001; Weston 1991). Situating experiences of disclosure in wider family networks would provide a more complete picture of coming out in families and a greater understanding of how sexuality functions and is negotiated within different generational networks.

Although this thesis has explored a wide range of themes and experiences it has, inevitably, not provided an exhaustive analysis of the participants' coming out stories. Limited space and time prevented a detailed investigation into some of the additional factors that were touched upon in some of the sibling coming out stories. This for example, included Sue and Monkey's experience with religion and changes in religious membership, Louis's account of class and the difficulties of being out in a working class 'hyper masculine' community, Jason's liberation to perform his sexuality at university, and the centrality of friendship in Ellen's process of self-discovery and disclosure. Another option for developing this research would be to focus more specially upon the intersections of class, ethnicity, religion and gender to determine if, and how these factors impact upon the sibling coming out experience and the way in which non-heterosexuality functions within the family.

As outlined in chapter two, Western society has been argued to have undergone a dramatic transformation of intimacy, which has changed the way we live and perceive family life. A shift in the social, legal and moral attitudes towards LGBs, which has shaped and been shaped by these changes to intimacy, has also been argued to provide more opportunities for lesbian and gays to live openly in contemporary society. It is important to recognise that my study offers a snapshot of the participants' sibling coming out experiences within this specific point in time. The relatively limited findings that are presented here cannot be taken out of historical context and generalised to other times or cultures. Given the dramatic shifts that have already occurred within family life and the changes that may

transform intimacy in the future, it would be interesting to repeat this research with similar groups of participants and similar methods in ten, twenty or thirty years' time. Doing so could provide an interesting picture of how wider social processes and change, impact upon the relational connections between LGBs and their families. It would also be interesting to develop this research by conducting a similar type of study in a different country which has different ways of 'doing' family and different social attitudes and policies on LGB life, to see how different or similar the experience of coming out to siblings is.

#### **Section Four: Concluding Remarks**

I would like to end on a final note by outlining what contributions my thesis offers to knowledge. First, it has shed light on new stories about the gay and lesbian sibling experience. By shifting the research gaze away from parents and focusing on the stories of siblings, I have highlighted the importance of these connections in processes of disclosure. Throughout this thesis, I have demonstrated that sibling accounts have rarely been included in empirical research on family coming out experiences, particularly within the UK. I argued that this marginalisation of sibling voices has perpetuated the assumption that these connections are not important in the context of disclosure. This absence of sibling stories was felt by many of the participants involved in this research, and for some getting their sibling account heard was an important factor in their participation.

When I heard you were doing research on siblings and non-heterosexuality I thought it was a great idea because so much of the whole story about coming out to families is focused on the parents um and not really how it changes your relationship with your siblings and also what the long term impacts are [Sarah: Mmm]. Because so many of our coming out stories on film and TV is just the coming out and it is never 10 years later, you know? [Sarah: Yeah]. Because my relationship with my siblings has been so fraught I just, quite frankly I just wanted to tell somebody my story. I wanted somebody to hear it you know? I wanted someone to hear my version of what happened (Molly)

This thesis acts as a powerful recognition of the study of siblings as a significant subject of inquiry in family life, family practices, the sociology of siblings and within studies of sexuality. By highlighting the importance of these relationships, it is my hope that siblings will be better accounted for and recognised

in future research concerning the family coming out story. When viewing patterns of disclosure through the relational connections between siblings, this thesis has also contributed towards an understanding of how and why the coming out experience remains to be a timely and significant issue in the lives of LGBs and their families.

## Epilogue

It's May 2014 and I am in the final months of writing up my PhD. My little sister and I are standing in our family kitchen, catching up after a long week at work. She turns to me and, out of the blue, asks if I remember the night I came out. I smile thinking about how many times I have told that story to others. I wonder if she remembers it the same way that I do. 'Of course', I reply. I listen intently as she recounts her story. She recalls coming in to my room and being told that I was gay. I laugh as she tells me that she was so surprised that she almost passed out. My heart fills with pride as I hear her say that she was so relieved that I was 'only gay', as for a moment she thought mum was going to tell her I was ill and that something was wrong with me. She tells me that it was a day she will never forget, as it changed everything about our relationship. I am hit with a wave of emotion as I realise she is right, coming out did change everything, but for the better not for the worse. Standing there in the kitchen, I think about how our sister bond has never been so strong, so close or so intimate. I smile as I realise how glad I am that I came out, and how lucky I am to have a sister like her.

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## Appendix 1: Call for Participants Sheet

# Sibling Relationships and Non-Heterosexuality



**Would you like to get involved in research which explores  
non-heterosexuality within sibling relationships?**

### **The Research**

My name is Sarah Hayes and I am a PhD student at Cardiff University. My research is exploring what happens to sibling relationships when a sibling comes out as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB). I am currently looking for LGB people and their heterosexual siblings (over the age of 16) to get involved with my research.

### **What would be involved?**

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in a face-to-face informal interview. Here we will talk a little about your life, your sibling relationships and the impact that non-heterosexuality has had upon your experiences as a sibling. After the interview you will be invited to keep a small diary for a four week period, thinking about and reflecting upon different weekly topics. Once the diaries are completed you will be invited to a final meeting where we can discuss the diary and research process over coffee and cake.

### **Where will the research take place?**

The interview can happen at a time and place convenient to you. I am more than happy to travel to you or we can meet within a more convenient place decided between us. I am based in Cardiff/Bristol and seeking participants that live within an approximate three hour travel distance.

### **Contact Information**

If you would like to participate within the research or if you require any further information please contact me on: [Hayessk@cf.ac.uk](mailto:Hayessk@cf.ac.uk)

## Appendix 2: Debriefing Statement

# Research Debriefing Statement



### Thank you for taking part in my research.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank you for being involved in my research. I may use anonymous parts of our interview narratives and your diary entries as examples within my doctoral thesis. Your narratives may also appear in future academic publications and presentations.

I would like to reassure you that all of this data will be kept strictly anonymous, and any identifiable information will be removed or changed. If you have any further questions about this, please do not hesitate to contact me.

I would also like to remind you that you are invited to view the final interview transcripts and research diaries. If this is something you wish to do, please let me know how you would like this to be sent to you (email or post).

Once again, I would like to sincerely thank you for your participation in my research. It is very much appreciated.

Sarah Hayes

[Hayessk@cf.ac.uk](mailto:Hayessk@cf.ac.uk)

Work: xxxxxxxxxxxx

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Miss Sarah Hayes

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## Appendix 3: Information Sheet

# Sibling Relationships and Non-Heterosexuality



## Participant Information Sheet

**You are being invited to take part in a research study.**

Before you agree to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being carried out, and what will be involved if you choose to take part. Please take the time to read the following information sheet carefully.

### **What is the purpose of the research?**

We have seen stories of sibling love and rivalry firmly illustrated throughout legends, fairy tales, and more recently popular culture. Within these stories the desirability, power and poignancy of sibling experiences has appeared to capture the interests of us all. Yet, we still have a very limited sociological understanding of the significance of sibling relationships. Within this research, I am specifically interested in exploring how the disclosure of non-heterosexuality impacts upon the experiences of siblings.

### **Who can take part?**

- Anyone who is over the age of sixteen who identifies as heterosexual and has gay, lesbian or bisexual siblings
- Anyone who is over the age of sixteen who identifies as gay, lesbian or bisexual and has heterosexual siblings
- Anyone who is over the age of sixteen who identifies as gay, lesbian or bisexual and has gay, lesbian or bisexual siblings
- It does not matter if you have more than one brother or sister or if they are half, step or adopted siblings

- You are welcome to invite your sibling(s) to participate in this research, but it is also okay to take part on your own

### **What would be involved?**

If you choose to participate, I would like to talk to you about how the disclosure of non-heterosexuality has impacted upon the relationships you have with your siblings. Your participation will involve a face to face informal interview. In this interview I will ask you to tell me a little about your life, your sibling relationships and the impact that non-heterosexuality has had upon your experiences as a sibling.

After the interview you will be invited to keep a small diary (written or audio – equipment will be provided) for a four week period. Here I will ask you to think about and reflect upon different weekly topics concerning your sibling relationships and what we have discussed so far. Depending upon location, after the diaries are completed you will be invited to a short meeting, where we can discuss the research over coffee and cake, or asked to pop the diaries in a stamped addressed envelope.

### **Where will the research take place?**

The interviews will happen at a time and place convenient to you. I am happy to come to your home, or we can meet within a more convenient place decided between us. The interviews can be organised as soon as you have given your consent to take part within the research.

I am based in Cardiff/Bristol and seeking participants that live within a three hour (approx) travel distance.

### **How will the information be recorded? What will be done with the information?**

With your permission I would like to record the interview using a digital tape recorder and write this up into what is called an interview transcript. This will allow me to read what you've said throughout our conversations. You will be quite welcome to view the transcript. If there is anything that you do not wish to be included in the findings, this can be removed at your request, up until the point of my final thesis write up.

Your discussions with me will be used for two main things; I will be analysing and using my analysis as part of my findings in a PhD thesis and in future academic presentations and publications. Please be assured that your personal details and identity will be kept strictly confidential and any identifying features will be changed or removed.

### **How will the information be kept private?**

All of the recordings, transcripts and diary entries will be anonymised. This means that your name and identifiable details will not appear anywhere within my research. In the interview you will be offered the opportunity to choose your own pseudonym (false name). This will be the name that you will be referred

to throughout the research project and any future academic presentations and publications. In line with the Data Protection Act the original recordings and diaries will be kept in a secure place for a period of five years.

### **What happens if I change my mind about taking part?**

Your participation in the research is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time without having to give a reason. You can email, write or call me to let me know that you no longer wish to be involved in the research study.

### **Who am I?**

My name is Sarah Hayes and I am a PhD student at Cardiff University, School of Social Sciences. I am 25 years old and I have three siblings; one younger sister and two older half brothers. I would love to hear about your sibling experiences.

This research is being funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

### **Contact Information:**

If you would like to participate within the research or if you require any further information please contact me on:

Email: [hayessk@cf.ac.uk](mailto:hayessk@cf.ac.uk)

Post:

Cardiff University School of Social Sciences  
1 – 3 Museum Place  
Cardiff  
CF10 3BD

## Appendix 4: Consent Form

# Sibling Relationships and Non-Heterosexuality



Please read the following statements and initial the box next to them to confirm that you agree with what is being said.

	Participant Initials	Researcher Initials
I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for this study. I have been given enough time to consider my participation and have had the opportunity to ask any questions that I may have, and have these answered satisfactorily.		
I understand that anonymous extracts from our discussions in the interview and the reflections that I record in my research diary may be used in a PhD thesis, and future academic papers, presentations and publications.		
I consent to the interview being taped using a digital recorder. I understand that I will be offered a copy of my interview transcript and given the opportunity to amend anything that I do not want included in the study, up until the final thesis write up.		
I understand that my participation within the research is entirely voluntary and I can withdraw at any point.		
I agree to participate within this research.		

Name of Participant (please print) .....

Date ..... Signature .....

Name of Researcher (please print) .....

Date ..... Signature .....